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POLYBIUS' *Histories*



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Editors' Foreword

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a massive expansion in courses dealing with ancient civilization and, in particular, the culture and literature of the Greek and Roman world. Never has there been such a flood of good translations available: Oxford's own World Classics, the Penguin Classics, the Hackett Library, and other series offer the English-speaking reader access to the masterpieces of classical literature from Homer to Augustine. The reader may, however, need more guidance in the interpretation and understanding of these works than can usually be provided in the relatively short introduction that prefaces a work in translation. There is a need for studies of individual works that will provide a clear, lively, and reliable account based on the most up-to-date scholarship without dwelling on minutiae that are likely to distract or confuse the reader.

It is to meet this need that the present series has been devised. The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* deliberately puts the emphasis on the literary works themselves. The volumes in this series will each be concerned with a single work (with the exception of cases where a "book" or larger collection of poems is treated as one work). These are neither biographies nor accounts of literary movements or schools. Nor are they books devoted to the total oeuvre of one author: our first volumes consider Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Symposium*, not the works of Ovid or Plato as a whole. This is, however, a question of emphasis, and not a straitjacket: biographical issues, literary and cultural background, and related works by the same author are discussed where they are obviously relevant. Authors have also been encouraged to consider the influence and legacy of the works in question.

As the editors of this series, we intend these volumes to be accessible to the reader who is encountering the relevant work for the first time; but we also intend that each volume should do more than simply provide the basic facts, dates, and summaries that handbooks generally supply. We would like these books to be essays in criticism and interpretation that will do justice to the subtlety and complexity of the works under discussion. With this in mind, we have invited leading scholars to offer personal assessments and appreciations of

their chosen works, anchored within the mainstream of classical scholarship. We have thought it particularly important that our authors be allowed to set their own agendas and to speak in their own voices rather than repeating the *idées reçues* of conventional wisdom in neutral tones.

The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* has been chosen simply because the series is published by Oxford University Press, USA; it in no way implies a party line, either Oxonian or any other. We believe that different approaches are suited to different texts, and we expect each volume to have its own distinctive character. Advanced critical theory is neither compulsory nor excluded: what matters is whether it can be made to illuminate the text in question. The authors have been encouraged to avoid obscurity and jargon, bearing in mind the needs of the general reader; but, when important critical or narratological issues arise, they are presented to the reader as lucidly as possible.

This series was originally conceived by Professor Charles Segal, an inspiring scholar and teacher whose intellectual energy and range of interests were matched by a corresponding humility and generosity of spirit. Although he was involved in the commissioning of a number of volumes, he did not—alas—live to see any of them published. The series is intended to convey something of the excitement and pleasure to be derived from reading the extraordinarily rich and varied literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. We hope that these volumes will form a worthy monument to a dedicated classical scholar who was committed to enabling the ancient texts to speak to the widest possible audience in the contemporary world.

Kathleen Coleman, Harvard University
Richard Rutherford, Christ Church, Oxford

Acknowledgments

The opportunity to write most of this book was provided by a year's leave in 2006. The leave was paid for by Trinity College Dublin's Centre for Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies (of which I am the director), a project funded by the Irish Government's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions. This funding has enabled us to undertake and promote exciting work that would otherwise have been impossible; and I would like to acknowledge our great debt to the Higher Education Authority for the generous support they have given us.

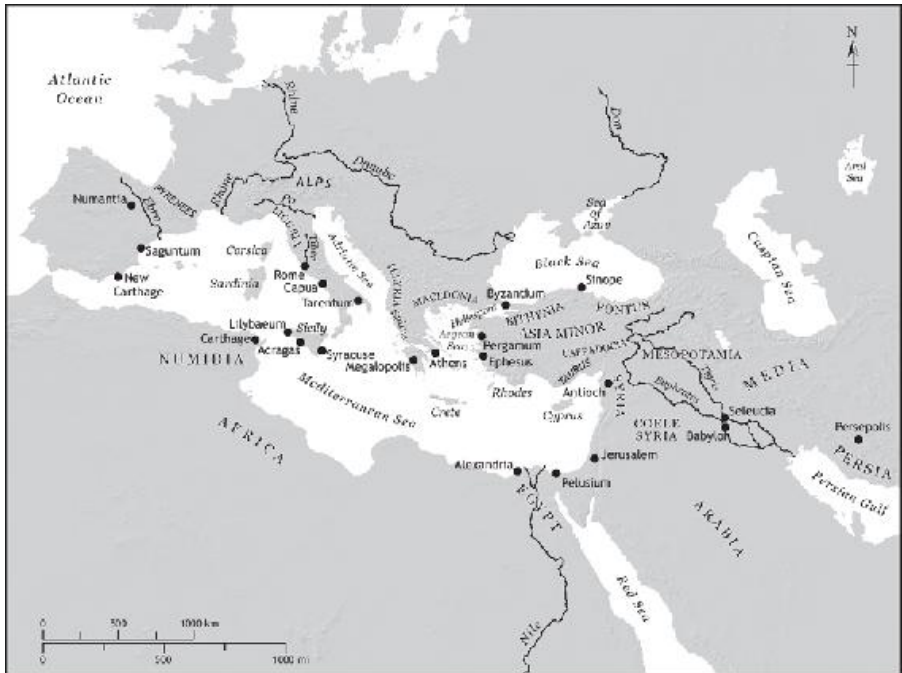
I have tested out various parts of this book on students, among whom I thank particularly Helen Stonehouse, Duncan Macrae, Charlotte Finnegan, Kevin McGee, and Jessie Evans. Perhaps they were just being kind to me, but they seemed to enjoy reading Polybius, an author not very commonly read on Classics "set-book" courses; and I certainly enjoyed their company in our Polybian investigations. I am also very grateful for the response to papers I delivered at my own institution, Trinity College Dublin, and at Manchester, Maynooth, Exeter, and Liverpool (where Bruce Gibson generously made available before publication his own excellent paper on Polybius' debt to Xenophon). I am very fortunate to have had the map-drawing expertise of Patrick Florance at my disposal—my thanks to him for including me in his busy schedule. I owe most, however, both to Andrew Erskine, who kindly took the time to read and correct the whole text, an act of scholarly *amicitia* for which there is no adequate thanks; and to Kathy Coleman and Richard Rutherford, the editors of this excellent series, *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*: they have done their editorial job so superbly, with such interest and attention to detail that I am tempted to say they should be blamed for any remaining errors. But that would be a poor return for their enthusiastic encouragement and the privilege they conferred on me in the first place by inviting me to write the book. I thank them most sincerely.

In the summer of 2007, Tom Harrison and his colleagues at Liverpool hosted, with the warmest hospitality, a small international gathering of Polybian scholars to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of Walbank's *Historical Commentary*

on *Polybius*, one of the great works of classical scholarship of this or any other age. It was an excellent conference over which Frank Walbank presided from a distance, too frail to attend. He died in October 2008, full of years and learning and distinction. I would just like to say, now sadly too late for him to hear, what a pleasure it was in writing this book to read and reread not only Polybius himself, but also his greatest commentator.

Polybius hoped his work would be useful. I hope above all that this book will lead those who have not read Polybius to take him up and grapple with the issues of power which he confronted and which are so central to the human condition.

Maps



Map 1 The Mediterranean world of Polybius



Map 2 Greece in the second century BC

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POLYBIUS'
Histories

Introduction

Why should we read Polybius' *Histories*? What does a second-century BC Greek historian have to offer the modern reader? If I had difficulty in answering these questions enthusiastically and positively, I would not (I hope) be writing this book. Polybius' account of the rise of Rome's empire and the nature of its government has impressed commentators through the ages, both for the excellence of its information and analysis, and for the sophistication of its historical method. His treatment of the Roman constitution in book 6 has retained its reputation as a classic work of political science. Furthermore, his vision of the world as an organic whole is almost prophetic in its anticipation of the modern concept of "globalization". We are dealing, then, with a historian generally and, in my opinion, correctly regarded as one of the best of the ancient world; and one who continues to challenge our interpretation of Roman history and of the roots of Mediterranean identities. In the course of this book I hope to justify these claims, but I think it only fair to start by saying that the *Histories* is often seen as a "difficult" work. A number of factors conspire to create this impression.

First, even what survives of the text is long: whether for expert or amateur readers, it is not easy to engage with such a scale of treatment and varied subject matter—forty books covering the period 264–146 BC. Polybius himself was aware of this danger and argued, not altogether convincingly, that it is much easier to follow large-scale works that present the whole picture than shorter monographs on specific subjects (3.32.1–10). Not only is it long, but after the opening five books, when we have scarcely got into the meat of the work, it is preserved only in part. The fragments, or excerpts, of the rest of the *Histories* are often very substantial, allowing us a good view of the entirety of what Polybius had to say in certain books; but even when whole episodes are fully extant, it is difficult to avoid the feeling of reading a halting, stop-start narrative.

Compounding these problems is a rather workmanlike, at times even awkward style of Greek. This is part of Polybius' persona as a historian—the hard-nosed pragmatist who is going to present the truth unadorned (16.17.9–11)—but however important to him this distinct lack of literary embellishment may have been for conveying the

veracity of his account, it is not what we might call user-friendly. Even in the ancient world some found it heavy going: at the end of the first century BC, for instance, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*de compositione verborum* 4.110), believed that Polybius' style made it difficult to read his work all the way through.

The length of the work and this perception that as a stylist Polybius was deficient may have contributed to a reluctance to translate him. In English, the only modern, complete, and readily available translation is that made by W. R. Paton for the Loeb Classical Library (1922–1927). Although this has performed sterling service, the interested general reader may well be put off by its six volumes and somewhat dated English. Here is Paton's version of Polybius' statement on the character of Scipio Africanus (10.3.1–2):

It is generally agreed that Scipio was beneficent and magnanimous, but that he was also shrewd and discreet with a mind always concentrated on the object he had in view would be conceded by none except those who associated with him and to whom his character stood clearly revealed. One of these was Gaius Laelius, who from his youth up to the end participated in his every word and deed, and who has produced the above impression upon myself, as his account seems both probable on the face of it and in accordance with the actual performances of Scipio.

This certainly conveys something of the involved character of Polybius' Greek, but it is labored and, by modern standards, not easy to read. More attractive is Scott-Kilvert's version in his one-volume translation for Penguin Classics (1979):

It is widely acknowledged that Scipio was a man of humane and generous disposition, but the testimony that he was also astute and discreet and possessed a mind which was always concentrated upon the purpose he had in view, comes only from those who were closely associated with him, to whom his character stood revealed as if by the light of day. One of these was Gaius Laelius, who had been the witness of almost every word and deed of Scipio's from his boyhood until the end of his life, and who convinced me of the truth of his evidence, because what he had to say seemed probable in itself and corresponded to the record of Scipio's achievements.

Although not as close to the Greek as Paton, the modern idiom has greatly improved its readability. While it is much more fluent, the Penguin translation, however, is at times fatally compromised by its

necessary selectivity. In this famous sketch of Scipio, for instance, and subsequent account of his capture of New Carthage (which I discuss shortly), it leaves out the character-revealing story of how Scipio stood for the aedileship (one of the annually elected officials of the Roman state) along with his brother, Lucius, to improve the latter's chances (10.4–5), and omits the marvelous scenes of Scipio's treatment of the captured inhabitants of the city, including that in which he is offered a beautiful young woman prisoner (10.17–20). There can scarcely be any such thing as a perfect translation, but with regard to Polybius' *Histories* the situation is disappointing.

Add all this together, and you are left with a long and mostly fragmentary work of history written in difficult and plain Greek, not completely satisfactorily translated into English. It is not an obviously appetizing prospect.

In the past, Polybius probably also suffered to a degree from being a writer of the Hellenistic age (323–30 BC), that era between the death of Alexander the Great and the triumph of the future emperor Augustus over Antonius and Cleopatra. Critics of his style would cite what they perceived to be the literary mediocrity of those times, but even from the point of view of historical events, in the English-speaking world there was for a long time something suspect about the period. It was not really proper Greek history, which lost its appeal after Alexander, nor yet the vital part of proper Roman history (the late Republic and early Empire); Polybius was no Herodotus or Thucydides, nor yet Sallust or Tacitus.

Modern scholarship has, we should be thankful, woken up to the fascination of the Hellenistic age and to the qualities of Polybius. He has been fortunate in attracting one of the great commentaries of Classical scholarship, that of F. W. Walbank (3 vols., 1957–1979), whose countless other contributions have brought brilliant illumination to many aspects of Polybius' work. But this and most modern studies of Polybius are designed for experts. In English, one can cite the excellent books of, for instance, K. Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (1981), A. M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (1995), or most recently C. B. Champion, *Cultural Politics in Polybius' Histories* (2004). While these and scores of articles have greatly advanced our understanding, the full panoply of modern scholarship can only be somewhat forbidding for a "general reader". Although Polybius receives his due in excellent introductory studies like T. J. Luce's *The Greek Historians* (1997), or J. Marincola's *Greek Historians* (2001), nothing has been written in English along the lines intended by *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*. Polybius has remained largely the preserve of experts.

This is a pity. For, in spite of initial appearances to the contrary,

there is a great deal in Polybius' *Histories* to attract the nonspecialist. First, he was writing about one of the most exciting and important developments in the history of the ancient world—the transformation of Rome from an Italian peninsular state into the first and only pan-Mediterranean super-power. War and imperialism are going through a period of particularly stern scrutiny at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the poor publicity they are attracting does not seem to have had any effect on our passion for reading about them. If it was really only the twentieth century that first saw a challenge to the primacy of political history—an agenda set by Thucydides, and endorsed repeatedly down the ages (never more enthusiastically or convincingly than by Polybius)—this has not prevented modern historians from continuing to pour out a stream of works for the general reader on the wars, empires, and political history of the modern era. And although the ancient world is perhaps too distant in time to arouse quite the same passions, Rome's acquisition of her empire was such a shatteringly dramatic story in Mediterranean history that Polybius' question right at the beginning of his work is as fresh and vital as when he posed it: who could possibly *not* be interested in this, the greatest success story ever recorded in human history?

While many authors have demonstrated that it is quite possible to write about interesting affairs in an uninteresting way, Polybius' writing, for a variety of reasons, is unusually gripping. The capture of New Carthage in Spain by the young Scipio Africanus in 209 BC (10.2–20), a famous account from the narrative of Rome's great war against Hannibal, may serve briefly to illustrate the point. Polybius starts this set piece with a character study of Scipio. Because of his exceptional fame, everyone will want to know what sort of person he was, especially as other commentators are quite wrong about him. They attribute far too much to his good fortune and not enough to his calculation (*logismos*) and foresight (*pronoia*). Like the famous Spartan legislator Lycurgus, Scipio created confidence among his men by presenting himself as divinely favored. He enjoyed a reputation for generosity and magnanimity, but only those who really knew him, people like Gaius Laelius, knew how shrewd (*agchinous*), discreet (*neptes*), and focused he was. Laelius tells of his exceptional bravery on the occasion when he rescued his father in a battle against Hannibal; but when he came to command armies himself, as one on whom the hopes of his people rested, he wisely avoided unnecessary personal danger. When his elder brother, Lucius, was standing for the aedileship and his prospects of success looked thin, he joined him as a candidate, knowing that his own popularity might bring Lucius the necessary votes. He needed to win over his mother, however, and he

did so by telling her of his dream in which he foresaw the election of himself and his brother. They were both duly elected, and people thought he was divinely favored, as the dream had come true; this opinion merely betrayed a failure to recognize his shrewdness (*agchinoa*), calculation (*logismos*), and foresight (*pronoia*).

Having corrected false assessments of Scipio's character, Polybius opens the story with the speech of encouragement Scipio delivered to his troops, in which he played down their recent reverse and emphasized the Carthaginian disunity; they must simply advance across the river (Ebro) and let the commanders decide what to do. Scipio had publicly discussed various options, but he had no intention of carrying out any of them: he would instead lay siege to New Carthage. This was entirely contrary to expectations, but worked out with the closest calculation (*eklogismos*). Rome's Celtiberian allies, he discovered, remained loyal, whereas the Carthaginian commanders had fallen out with each other and were mistreating their Spanish subjects. The Carthaginian forces were split into three armies, each more than ten days' march from New Carthage, which was an important base for the Carthaginians: they stored most of their money and materials there. It clearly posed great danger to the Roman forces. So Scipio reconnoitered it during the winter. He learned of its small garrison of only 1,000 troops and the tidal lagoon protecting it, and he spent the winter planning his assault in secret. Although other writers recognize these careful calculations (*eklogismoi*), they persist in attributing his success to the gods and chance, not to Scipio's own foresight (*pronoia*).

Before narrating the siege, Polybius says he must describe for his readers the topography and layout of the city—which he does in some detail. Scipio then addresses his troops in a speech displaying careful calculation (*apologismoi*), telling them of his plan, which he claims had been suggested to him in a dream by Poseidon in which the god promised his help at the vital time. When battle was joined, it was evenly contested for many hours. Scipio himself took part, so that he could see what was happening and be seen by his men, but he also took sensible precautions to protect himself. The attack on the wall was repulsed for most of the day, but when the water receded, enabling an attack across the lagoon, his troops remembered Scipio's reference to Poseidon and in due course overran the defenses. Polybius then describes at length the systematic method of slaughter and pillage employed by the Roman army and the equitable way they had of collecting and distributing booty. Scipio shows clemency to the surviving women and children, enslaves the men (with a promise of freedom on the successful conclusion to the war), but has the foresight (*pronoia*) to use some of them as sailors and thus greatly increase the

strength of his fleet. He treats the hostages with respect and kindness and is innocently slow to understand the oblique petition of one of them, the sister-in-law of a local king, Andobales, to protect her and her daughters from sexual violence (10.18.12–15):

She hesitated a little and said, “General, you do not rightly follow my words if you think that my present request is about food”. Scipio then understood what the woman meant, and observing the youth and beauty of the daughters of Andobales and of many other princes, he was forced to tears, recognising in how few words she had conveyed to him the danger to which they were exposed. So he now made it clear to her that he understood what she had been saying, and taking her by the right hand he told her and the others not to be afraid, for he would look after them as if they were his own sisters and children and would accordingly appoint reliable men to attend on them.¹

On the same theme, some of his soldiers come across a particularly beautiful young woman of the town and offer her as a gift to Scipio. He finds her attractive but chivalrously declines—in Polybius’ opinion—to convey to his men the message that such delights are fine for times of leisure, but not good for the mind or body in times of action. Scipio invites her father to give her in marriage to whichever of the citizens he should choose. He then dispatches news of his victory to Rome and remains for some time in New Carthage, putting his army and fleet through strenuous training exercises. When he thinks everything is in proper order, he advances on Tarragona.

Although presented in unadorned Greek, this is writing of high quality: attentive to detail, coherently planned, and constantly varied in treatment and subject matter. Scipio’s character is vital for understanding the whole episode: the reader is reminded of this by the frequent repetition throughout the story of the same words used for Scipio’s character traits identified in the portrait at the beginning. Polybius moves from general character description to the details of Scipio’s strategic thinking in assaulting New Carthage and the care with which he prepared the attack (noting again how other commentators fail to appreciate this foresight). The tension mounts as the narrative of the attack is postponed to allow for a description of the lay-out and topography of the city—a description that will assist the reader in understanding why the assault eventually progressed as it did. The battle is further postponed by Scipio’s speech promising the assistance of Poseidon, which again demonstrates the extraordinary care with which he calculated all his moves. The fighting itself is observed with a soldier’s eye for detail: for instance, the great height of the ladders necessary to scale such tall walls (Polybius is elsewhere

[5.87; 9.18.5] fiercely critical of Philip V of Macedon for arriving to besiege the town of Melitaea in 217 BC with ladders that were too short). The crucial moment comes with the ebbing of the tide or opening of sluice-gates (it is not clear what caused the water level in the lagoon to sink). The victory offers an opportunity to describe the Roman method of plundering a captured city, and further demonstration of Scipio's qualities when he deals with the captured population.

This episode, I hope, gives a flavor of how good Polybius can be. As I have observed, however, incomplete as the *Histories* is, it still contains a vast amount of material. My purpose in [chapter 1](#), therefore, is to consider the work as a whole, give some idea of what is in it, and explain what it is all about, the overall conception and design. This is also one of its great qualities—a clarity of vision in relation to Roman imperial expansion, and a literary plan to present and explain it that is executed with almost military precision.

The capture of New Carthage also points to what is probably the single most characteristic feature of Polybius' writing, and one of the main reasons for its exceptional interest: his almost constant authorial intervention to explain, disagree, or ruminate discursively. This forms the topic of [chapter 2](#). No other historian from antiquity comes even close in the frequency and forcefulness with which Polybius interrupts himself to think out loud, and not just on matters of major importance, such as how to write history, or the nature of the Roman constitution. Among many other subjects discussed, there are disquisitions on the power of music to soften the harshness of nature (4.20–21); on pig farming and the sort of animals that inhabit Corsica, a matter on which his predecessor Timaeus (c. 350–260 BC) was hopelessly wrong (12.3); on the latest and best techniques of fire signaling (10.43–47); on the differences between Greek and Roman military stakes for building palisades (18.18). In contrast to some commentators, like Sacks (1981, 8), who regard this sort of interruption as a “wearisome” literary practice, it can be seen as one of the most interesting characteristics of Polybius, and one of the principal means by which he added spice and variety to the narrative. He was well aware of the limited human capacity to concentrate on one thing for any length of time (38.5–6), and consciously breaks up his story. In the passage we have just examined, the sketch of Scipio's character is not a detached, neutral description: it is dominated by Polybius' personal interpretation, expressed in his own voice, and by his personal conviction that others have not understood Scipio correctly—a message repeated a number of times. Then, having explained Scipio's plan of campaign and finally arriving at the stage where he can start the action, he finds it necessary to break off again

to tell his readers about the topography and position of the city. This is a subject, he frequently emphasizes (e.g., 12.25 e. 1), of vital importance for the writing of good history. Polybius' expert military description of the battle proceeds to its inevitable conclusion, before we are again diverted, this time by information on Roman military procedures.

Perversely if understandably, it is his two surviving digressory books for which Polybius is most famous (the excursus on geography in book 34 being almost entirely lost). With so much of the heart of his story either fragmentary or missing, the attention of generations has been held by what he has to say about the Roman constitution in book 6 and about history writing in book 12. This latter is only the centerpiece of his thoughts on history, which are also scattered throughout the whole work. These various statements constitute what is undoubtedly the most important and interesting contribution to the theory and practice of history that survives from the ancient world. It is not uniformly brilliant—his treatment of the causes of wars (as set out, for instance, at 3.6–31) is often seen as unsophisticated—but he simply has so much more to say on the subject of history than anyone else: the concentration on contemporary and “pragmatic” (i.e., political) history, the insistence that it be “universal” and true, its practical usefulness for a life of politics, the qualifications needed to write it and methods to be followed, the polemical attacks on the shortcomings of Timaeus, Zeno, Antisthenes, and others—these are all “classics” of historiographical thinking. We may not be convinced by all he says, but it is unfailingly interesting.

While [chapter 2](#) examines Polybius' theoretical approach to writing history, [chapter 3](#) is intended to illustrate his literary practice, in particular how he creates his narrative, how the story develops. Just as the vagaries of textual survival have required us to rely for our assessment of the Roman historian Livy on the part of his story that he believed would interest his readers less (ancient as opposed to contemporary Roman history), so, in the case of Polybius, the only fully extant books are the first five. Of these, the first two, he says himself, are introductory to the main work, taking events from the first war between Rome and Carthage to the outbreak of the Hannibalic war (264–220 BC), and even when he starts the history proper in book 3 in 220, it is not really until 217 and book 5 that history becomes an organic whole and brings together into one stream the previously disparate elements in Mediterranean history (5.105.4–10). So Polybius is just getting into his stride when our text fails us, and we have to rely on the abridgement of the *Excerpta Antiqua* and the later excerpts made in the tenth century for the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. We must be grateful for this at times

generous bonus, but the excerpts are better for some books than others, and nonexistent for books 17, 19, 26, 34, 37, and 40. A great deal of scholarly attention and ingenuity has (rightly) been devoted to the parts of Polybius' *Histories* that are not complete, but we can really only observe him in fully operational mode as a historian in the first five books. A close exposition in [chapter 3](#) of some aspects of the narrative of books 4 and 5 reveals, I believe, the careful artistry of his composition, his excellence as a writer.

One of the vital ingredients in Polybius' thinking about history is his own role in it. His readiness to offer an opinion about almost anything betrays the sort of self-confidence born of a hugely successful career as a politician, general, and statesman who spent his adult life in the company of the most powerful men in the world. [Chapter 4](#) takes as its starting point Polybius' career, but with the purpose of examining how it affected his thinking, particularly in relation to decline: was Rome already on the slippery slope of imperial decline? What did he think of Roman rule?

Polybius' life was unusually rich in excitement and adventure. Brought up among the privileged elite of the Achaean League, he was clearly headed straight for the top of that organization and had reached the office of Hipparch, cavalry general, second-in-command of the Confederacy's forces, when Macedonian ambitions intervened and changed the course of his life. After the Roman victory over Perseus, king of Macedon, at Pydna in 167 BC, the senate lost patience with the Greeks, and Polybius found himself among the 1,000 leading Achaeans deported to Italy. If he felt this was unfair—and an interesting excerpt from book 28 (6–7) presents him as advocating a policy in 170/169 of closer collaboration with Rome than some of his colleagues in the Achaean League wished to pursue—it turned out to be not a hindrance but a brilliant opportunity. He became a close friend of Scipio Aemilianus and moved in the highest circles of Roman society. He accompanied Scipio to Africa and Spain, returning to Italy (probably in 150) by retracing Hannibal's route over the Alps. He was present with Scipio at the destruction of Carthage in 146 and quite possibly of Numantia in 133, and he voyaged beyond the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic. He took a leading role in the reconstruction of Greece after the disaster of 146. This all amounts to a life of exceptional drama—strikingly similar, incidentally, to that of Jewish historian Josephus in the first century AD. They both started out with a leading career among their own people assured, a career cut short by opposition to Rome (in neither case their fault), but then transformed by a new life in Rome itself, supported by the highest patronage. They both displayed a similar degree of admiration for Rome and her institutions, as well as a readiness to criticize her

shortcomings.

Scholars of the ancient world are accustomed to using the life and career of an ancient author to help in assessing the likely interests, attitudes, approaches, and reliability of his writings. Polybius' career certainly provides rich material for this sort of analysis. He was a man of action himself, for instance, and it is easy to understand how he might think that only a person of such experience would be able to interpret properly the events of history: to be a real historian you had to be a soldier-politician (e.g., 12.25f–h; 12.28). Polybius' involvement in the story he tells, however, is more complicated and central. He becomes, to a certain extent, not just the recorder of events, but the hero, too—in terms of the epic poetry to which he likens history, not just Homer, but also Odysseus. The latter is the perfect man of action (*pragmatikos*): versatile, widely traveled, observant, and “experienced in the wars of men and grievous waves” (Homer, *Od.* 8.183). Polybius states his conviction “that the dignity of history demands such a man” (12.28.1), no doubt thinking of himself. As the work proceeds, his own role in events becomes increasingly important. At the start, if Rome was in some sense Fate's appointee to unify the world, he seemed content to complement the role of Fate by writing the first truly universal history and explaining the remarkable rise of Rome down to 167 BC. In this part of the work (the first twenty-nine books) he succeeded, on the whole, admirably. Later he decided to extend the story down to 146, but his stated purpose changed: he now wanted to investigate how Rome used its new domination and what people thought about it, whether they found it acceptable. Although he set himself these new questions, some feel he never really tried very hard to answer them. In this period he played a greater part in the events themselves, and the suspicion arises that this personal involvement in the action distracted him from his task and led him to place himself at the center of the story—the historian, not as Homer, but as Homeric hero. Thucydides, just to take one example, was a witness of the story he told, but he rarely intrudes in it. Polybius not only wrote the history of Rome's imperial success, he also wrote himself into it.

At every turn Polybius' whole mode is explanatory. The central task he famously set himself was to explain how Rome came to dominate the world. In addressing this question, book 6 provides a vital part of the answer, which is the subject of [chapter 5](#). It concerns the Roman “constitution” (*politeia*), a word that embraces the army and religion as well as, centrally, the political power structures of the state. His concentration on the constitution in book 6 may reflect previous political philosophy; his understanding of it may have been unrealistically rigid; and he may have failed to appreciate the complexities of Roman political life. But his insistence that the

political structures of the state, its mixed constitution in particular, lay behind its unparalleled success was a perceptive and imaginative explanatory strategy. It was also very influential in later ages, after Polybius “reappeared” in Europe in the fifteenth century. In the epilogue, I sketch an outline of the fate of Polybius’ *Histories* after his death, from classical antiquity to the present. He was used directly by the Roman historian Livy as a source, and in Renaissance times he was regarded as a valuable authority on military matters. But it was, above all, Polybius’ role in the transmission of the ancient concept of mixed government that secured for him the attention and admiration of the modern world.

1. When quoting from Polybius, I generally use the Loeb translation as my starting point, but I have adjusted it where I thought necessary or desirable.

Contents and Organization of the Work

It is easy enough to describe in outline the subject matter of Polybius' major historical work. "Who is so worthless or lazy," he asks (1.1.5), "as not to want to know by what means and under what sort of constitution the Romans conquered almost the whole of the known world and subjected it to their sole rule in just under 53 years?" The period he refers to here starts in 220 BC with the beginning of Rome's war against Hannibal, the Second Punic War, and finishes in 168/167 with the defeat of King Perseus of Macedon, in the so-called Third Macedonian War. At the beginning of book 3 (3.4.2–7), however, he announces a change of plan to include an account of Rome's subsequent policy and method of rule, coupled with an assessment of the reaction and opinions of her imperial subjects. In this way, readers will be able to judge whether Roman rule was acceptable and whether it should be admired or found blameworthy. This, along with an unspecified period Polybius identifies as "the time of disturbance and trouble," takes the story to 146, when, by happy (or unhappy) coincidence, Rome razed to the ground the cities of Carthage and Corinth. In simple terms, the original plan is covered in books 1–29; books 30–39 then contain the additional analysis of Roman rule and coverage of the time of disturbance and trouble. Prominent in the way they stand outside the narrative are the books comprising a description of the Roman state (book 6), an analysis of history writing (book 12), and an excursus on geography (book 34, now lost). Book 40 seems to have been a sort of chronological résumé outlining the contents of each book.

Polybius' Standard Procedure

If the outline is straightforward, the details are a great deal more complicated. How does one organize a history of the whole

Mediterranean over a seventy-year period? The theoretical difficulty of representing the reality of history on the written page, a difficulty only exacerbated by the huge scale countenanced by Polybius, is well described by the first-century BC Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily in a remarkably modern (indeed postmodern) formulation (20.43.7):

At this point one might find fault with the art of history, observing that in life many different actions happen at the same time, but that it is necessary for those who record them to interrupt the narrative and to parcel out different times to simultaneous events contrary to nature, with the result that, although the actual experience of the events contains the truth, yet the written record, deprived of such power, while imitating the events, falls far short of arranging them as they really were.

Although Polybius is generally thought not to owe a large intellectual debt to his fifth-century predecessor, Herodotus, the way he includes a vast array of incidental material, and often advances by roads that are anything but straight, certainly recalls the general character of Herodotus' study of the origins and course of the Persian Wars. There are other, more important similarities, which I will come to later. There is also a fundamental difference in the way that Polybius tries very hard and often to make clear exactly where he is, where he is going, and how he is going to get there, and in the way that once he is finished with a subject, he takes considerable care to round it off with a summary. The skill with which he organizes and structures his extremely diverse and scattered material, and guides his readers around it, is a very substantial achievement in itself.

Polybius builds his story on a chronological and geographical basis. The chronological basis is the Olympiad, the four-year period between celebrations of the Olympic Games, starting in 776 BC. As a system of dating, it was introduced to history writing by the Sicilian historian Timaeus (c. 350–260 BC). Once world history flowed together into a single story after the conference at Naupactus in 217 BC (which comes at the end of book 5 and Olympiad 140, the four years from 220 to 217, or more accurately 220/219 to 217/216, as Olympiad years do not overlap exactly with our years), Polybius' regular procedure is to treat the events of each Olympiad year by geographical zone, moving in the same order from Italy to Sicily, Spain, Africa, Greece and Macedon, Asia, and Egypt, and completing the circuit before starting back in Italy again at the beginning of the next Olympiad year. Of course in some circumstances—where a series of events begins, for instance, in Spain and ends in Italy—it can happen that strict adherence to the geographical order results in the end of a particular story being narrated before its beginning. Polybius recognizes this

(15.24a), but evidently felt that any drawback in the system was outweighed by the advantages it had in demonstrating the interconnectedness of events (5.31.3–5). Usually (but not always) he assigns two books to each Olympiad. So, for example, books 7 and 8 cover the four years of Olympiad 141, from 216/215 to 213/212; books 9 and 10 those of Olympiad 142 (212/211 to 209/208). When he comes to the end of the war against Hannibal, however, the last two years of such a momentous conflict, Olympiad 144,1 (204/203) and Olympiad 144,2 (203/202), get a book each (books 14 and 15).

Polybius presents his material in what for the sake of convenience I identify here as two main modes of writing: narrative, where he tells the story (for present purposes I count speeches as part of the narrative story), and what we might call narrative pause, where he takes a break from the events themselves to discuss his plans, summarize or recapitulate what he has been saying, or offer analysis and comment of one sort or another on a host of different topics. The distinction I draw here is to some extent artificial, as there is not very much “pure” narrative in Polybius; that is, where he avoids all analytical commentary. But you can identify where his main purpose is telling the story or where he stops to comment on it. His most regular and important pauses concern history writing and geography; we will look at those topics more carefully in [chapter 2](#). For the moment, I want first to examine some of the other narrative pauses. As I indicated in the introduction, this feature of his work is highly characteristic of Polybius and much more prominent than in other historians of the ancient world.

Programmatic Statements

The beginning of each book is an obvious place to look for clear plans, and here there were different types of formal introductory material. Polybius (11.1a.1–5) distinguishes between a list of contents, usually attached to the outside of the scroll (*prographe*), and an introductory survey, included in the narrative, of what is to come (*proekthesis*). For books 1 to 6 he says he wrote only external lists of contents (*prographai*), none of which survives, but thereafter he prefaced each Olympiad with a preliminary synopsis (*proekthesis*). This statement gives the impression that he did not write any introductory surveys in the first six books, which is quite false: clearly he means that he did not write a survey in the same systematic way that he did for later books. Whatever the difficulties of terminology, Polybius’ constant references to structure and contents are part of his didactic purpose—the work will not be of much use if the reader does not know where

he is or what is going on—but they also tend to draw attention to the scope and scale of the work, to its universality (14.1). You have to make this sort of statement when you are, like Polybius, writing truly “universal” history (a topic we examine in [chapter 2](#)).

Right at the beginning (1.3), Polybius identifies the 140th Olympiad as the starting point of his history proper, the first events being the Social War (the Aetolians versus the Achaeans) starting in 220, and the Fourth Syrian War (Egypt against Syria) and the Second Punic War (the Hannibalic war), both starting in 219. Before this, history had been dispersed; afterward (by the end of Olympiad 140, that is), it all became one organic whole, as Rome began to dominate the world and create a single stream of history. The Greeks were not familiar with the history of Rome and Carthage before 220 BC, however, and two introductory books (*prokataskeue* in Greek) are deemed necessary to give the reader a context for the history proper and make everything as clear as possible. Polybius says he is going to start book 1 with Rome’s first overseas operation, when they crossed to Sicily at the beginning of the First Punic War in 264 (1.5). Although he recognizes that you cannot keep going backward and must begin somewhere, he does add one further introductory section, starting with the capture of Rome by the Gauls in 387/386 BC (1.6). So, in the space of four chapters he has identified 220 as the start of the work proper, 264 as the start of book 1, and 387 as the start of the introduction to book 1. He was very interested in beginnings (and how they differ from causes and pretexts—see later discussion in this chapter), and it is no surprise that he challenges the gnomic saying “the beginning is half the whole”; no, he says, beginnings are all of the whole, they reach right to the end of a work, and writers and readers should pay very careful attention to them (5.32.1–5).

By chapter 13, Polybius has worked his way from 387 to 264, and is ready to begin the introductory two books. But first he lists the main events to be covered (technically a *proekthesis* for books 1 and 2): the First Punic War (1.13–64), followed by the war of Carthage against her mercenaries (1.65–88); then the growth of Carthaginian power in Spain under Hamilcar, Hasdrubal, and Hannibal (treated in individual chapters at 2.1, 2.13, 2.36); Rome’s first war in Illyria (2.2–12); her conquest of the Gauls of northern Italy (2.14–35); and, bringing the introductory books to an end, the series of aggressive acquisitions and conquests made by King Cleomenes III of Sparta from 229 until his defeat at the hands of Antigonus Doson in 222 BC, known as the Cleomenean War (2.37–70). He emphasizes the summary nature of this introductory material, but indicates that he will go into a little more detail on the First Punic War, as it gives such an excellent opportunity to see the natural character of each side. When he has

finished the First Punic War (1.63.4–1.64.6), he brings it to an end with various discursive thoughts on the nature of the war, its length and particularly its scale, which he regards as greater than any other war. Indeed, it involved so many warships that readers will wonder why the Romans, now masters of the world, are presently unable to put such fleets to sea; but he will explain this when he comes to discuss the Roman constitution (in book 6). This sort of forward reference is highly characteristic of the way Polybius constantly integrates his work.

The process of introduction, summary, recapitulation is continuous, occurring not just at the beginning and end of books. Book 2 opens with a summary of the contents of book 1, and then proceeds to the remaining topics to be covered in the introduction, but when Polybius comes to the conquest of northern Italy, for instance (2.14), he explains why he should describe the Gauls and their territory:

I think it will be useful to give some account of these peoples, which must be a summary one, in order not to depart from the original plan of my work as defined in the preface. We must, however, go back to the time when they first occupied these districts. I think the story is not only worth knowing and remembering, but quite necessary for my purpose, as it shows what sort of men and what sort of country Hannibal relied on in his attempt to destroy Rome's dominion. I must first describe the nature of the country and its position in relation to the rest of Italy. A sketch of its particular character, regionally and as a whole land, will help us better understand the more important events I have to relate.

And when the Gallic war is finished, he rounds it off with general considerations about the conflict (2.35.2-10). If you take into account the number, desperation and daring of the combatants and the number of casualties, it was the greatest of wars, although it was marked by poor planning and judgment, as the Gauls made decisions based solely on passion. It is important for future generations to recognize the weakness of barbarian power, so they can resist it with confidence. Those who have written about the Persian Wars and the Gallic attack on Delphi (in 279/278 BC) have served well the cause of Hellenic freedom by showing how there is no need to be terrified by hordes of barbarian invaders: huge armies can be defeated by intelligence and cool calculation.

The Cleomenean War is the next new topic, and Polybius marks the change in characteristic fashion (2.37.1–4):

I have now given a continuous account, suitable to this

preliminary plan of my book, of events in Sicily, Libya [i.e., North Africa] and so forth down to the beginning of the Social War and that second war between the Romans and Carthaginians, usually known as the Hannibalic War. This, as I stated at the outset, is the date at which I propose to begin my history, and now bidding farewell for the present to the West, I must turn to the affairs of Greece, so that everywhere alike I may bring this preliminary or introductory sketch down to the same date, and, having done so, start on my detailed explanatory narrative.

At the end of book 2, as you would expect, with the whole introduction coming to an end, he explains carefully what he has been doing (2.71.7–10):

I have thus completed this introduction or preliminary part of my History. In it I have shown in the first place when, how and why the Romans, having mastered Italy, first undertook enterprises outside that land and disputed command of the sea with the Carthaginians; and next I have dealt with the state of Greece and Macedonia and with that of Carthage as it existed then. So, in accordance with my original purpose, having reached the date at which the Greeks were on the eve of the Social War, the Romans on the eve of the Hannibalic War, and the kings of Asia about to enter on the war for Coele-Syria, I must now bring this book to a close, which coincides with the final events preceding these wars and the death of the three kings who had up to now directed affairs.

Because book 3 is the start of the history proper, Polybius uses the first five chapters as a general introduction. He lays out in summary fashion (*proekthesis*) all the main events of the story from the beginning in 220 to the defeat of Macedon in 167 at the end (3.2–3), so that the reader knows what to expect. This is when he announces his intention to extend the story to 146 (3.4–5). Here, he is a little vague about what he calls the period of “disturbance and trouble” (3.4.12) that ended with the disasters of 146. These were events that Polybius not only personally witnessed, but in which he took a leading role; and he says that writing about them was almost like starting a new work (3.4.13). He is probably referring to books 35 to 39, which might be taken as a new unit, marked off by the geographical excursus of book 34. This would put the beginning of the period of disturbance in about 151, but he was perhaps not intending to demarcate a very specific period; rather, he saw a general decline into disorder after 167. The last action of book 3 is the shattering defeat of the Roman army at the battle of Cannae in 216, and Polybius ends the book by

explaining how, having dealt with affairs in Spain and Italy down to the end of Olympiad 140, he will do the same for Greece, before moving on to a separate account of the Roman constitution—another forward reference to the crucial book 6.

Books 4 and 5 run together more or less as one continuous whole: there is no summary at the end of book 4 and no introduction at the beginning of book 5. But in the first two chapters of book 4, now that he is finally coming to detailed Greek history, Polybius recapitulates what he had said in 2.37–70 about the origins of the Achaean League and reaffirms the rationale for starting in Olympiad 140. For it was at this time (roughly speaking) that Fortune “rebuilt the world” by replacing all senior political personnel in the Mediterranean zone: Philip V had just come to the throne of Macedon (in 221); Achaeus proclaimed himself king in Asia Minor (220); Antiochus III had succeeded to the Seleucid throne (in 223); Ariarathes IV Eusebes was the new king of Cappadocia (220); Ptolemy IV Philopator of Egypt (221); Lycurgus in Sparta (220/219); and Hannibal was just appointed Carthaginian general (221). As you would expect, Polybius says, these new leaders started a new series of events. By the end of book 5, he needs only to state briefly that he has now brought Greek history up to the end of Olympiad 140. In the next book he will proceed to his discussion of the Roman constitution, after briefly recapitulating the contents of the first five books.

There is one type of sign-posting particularly characteristic of books 4 and 5, the synchronism, where Polybius stops at a particular point in the narrative and tells us what was going on elsewhere at the same time. For instance, at 4.37.1–7, when Aratus succeeded his father as Achaean general (in spring 219), Scopas was still Aetolian general, Hannibal was starting the siege of Saguntum, Lucius Aemilius Paullus was sent to Illyria, Antiochus III was about to invade Coele-Syria and Ptolemy IV was preparing to fight him, Lycurgus the Spartan king was besieging the Athenaeum in the territory of Megalopolis, the Achaeans were recruiting mercenaries, Philip V was moving out of Macedonia, and Rhodes was going to war against Byzantium. In the course of books 4 and 5, there are eight such synchronisms. They are connected with the chronological organization of these books, which is different from Polybius’ established procedure subsequently. As Mediterranean history only began to flow into a single story at (or shortly after) the conference of Naupactus in 217 right at the end of Olympiad 140, Polybius does not divide this particular Olympiad into its constituent years and geographical zones, as he normally did thereafter. To demonstrate that the events that happened in different parts of the world were not yet organically linked, he simply followed a story down through a number of years, before moving on to the next story

(5.31.3–5). The synchronisms are a device to help readers locate themselves in the correct year; it is clear that they mark the beginning and the end of the campaigning season in each year of the 140th Olympiad. As so often, his concern is that readers will know at all times where they are chronologically.

Character Sketches

Another variety of narrative pause is the character sketch, often written when someone dies (an obvious place to summarize a career), but there are also running analyses of prominent people as their careers develop. There is, of course, nothing specifically Polybian about this: the evaluation of character was an established part of Greek history writing from its beginning, and brief death notices have their place in Homer's battle scenes in the *Iliad*. In Homer, such notices serve to increase the poignancy of death. This is not usually Polybius' primary purpose, although there are on occasion Homeric resonances.

Strongly reminiscent of Homer, it seems to me, is, for example, the short biography of the Seleucid pretender Achaeus, when he lies at the mercy of King Antiochus III, who bursts into tears at the sight of his sorry fate (8.20.9–11):

For Achaeus was the son of Andromachus and brother of Laodice the wife of Seleucus; he had married Laodice the daughter of king Mithradates and had been lord of all Asia west of the Taurus; and now, when he was supposed by his own forces and those of the enemy to be living secure in the strongest fortress in the world, he was actually sitting on the ground tied hand and foot and at the mercy of his enemies.

Among many Homeric parallels, we might cite the case of Iphidamas, son of Antenor, when he faces death at the hands of Agamemnon (*Iliad* 11.221–31). Who was it that first faced Agamemnon?

It was Iphidamas son of Antenor, a man both brave and of great stature, who was brought up in fertile Thrace, the mother of sheep. Cisses, his mother's father, brought him up in his own house when he was a child—Cisses, father to fair Theano. When he reached manhood, Cisses would have kept him there, and was for giving him his daughter in marriage, but as soon as he had married he set out to fight the Achaeans with twelve ships that followed him: these he had left at Percote and had come on by

land to Ilius. He it was that now met Agamemnon son of Atreus.

The parallel lies in the poignancy of the biographical details. The weeping of great men at terrible events, moved by the inevitability of fate, and by the realization that the same could happen to them are slightly different themes. Xerxes, for example, wept when observing his army at the Hellespont (Herodotus 7.45–46) and Scipio Aemilianus when Carthage burned in 146 BC (Appian, *Lib.* 132). Zeus was moved to tears of blood when contemplating the fate of his beloved son Sarpedon (Homer, *Iliad* 16.459), although in his case he cannot have feared the same fate for himself.

When the Spartan King Cleomenes decided to opt for glorious death rather than continued captivity in Egypt (5.38–39), Polybius makes the Homeric reference explicit: Cleomenes must have had in mind the words of Hector when he faced his end at Troy (“Nay, but not without a struggle let me die, neither ingloriously, but in the working of some great deed for the hearing of men that are yet to be”—*Iliad* 22.304–305):

they died by their own hands like brave men and Spartans. It was in this way that Cleomenes departed this life, a man tactful in his relationships, with a great capacity for the conduct of public affairs, and, in a word, designed by nature to be both a leader and a king.

You could almost imagine that he had just been run through by one of the heroes on the plain of Troy.

Polybius’ main interest in character description, however, relates to his strong belief in the usefulness of history (see [chapter 2](#)): understanding great men was necessary if they were to provide useful examples for the future; if you misunderstood them, your historical analysis could only be flawed, and thus of no use. As we saw in the introduction, people were mistaken about the character of Scipio Africanus and so were unable to assess his actions correctly. Understandably, character sketches feature prominently in Polybius’ work.

It is usually great men that interest him, but villains sometimes elicit a death notice or character study. Although he takes trouble to emphasize that there is no point dwelling on someone like the worthless Egyptian courtier Agathocles (15.35.1), by the time he makes that statement, he has already dealt at considerable length with Agathocles’ death (15.25–34) and offers a summary of his life (15.34.3–6):

Agathocles displayed neither courage in war nor conspicuous

ability, nor was he fortunate or enviable in his management of politics, nor, finally, did he have the acuteness of a courtier or the essential deviousness which made Sosibius and several others so successful until the end of their lives in their management of king after king. On the contrary, it was quite different with Agathocles. Owing to Philopator's incapacity as a ruler he attained an exceptionally high position; and in this position although he found himself after the king's death most favourably placed to maintain his power, he lost both his power and his life through his own cowardice and indolence, and was very soon universally despised.

(We might note how in the following chapter Polybius is led by the name Agathocles into an irrelevant assessment of the character of the much more famous Agathocles, king of Syracuse in the fourth century and via him to Dionysius I of Sicily. The same thing happens in 8.9–11, when in the middle of a discussion of Philip V of Macedon, we get an extensive digression on Alexander the Great's father, Philip II, occasioned simply by the name Philip.)

Like Agathocles, Heracleides, Philip V's wicked councilor, is described at some length (13.4). He was naturally inclined to evil, and although he was the son of manual workers, he had the qualities of a successful rogue. He prostituted himself in his youth, but later showed sharpness of mind and a good memory. He bullied his subordinates and was obsequious to his superiors. Thrown out of his native Tarentum on suspicion of trying to betray it to Rome, he took up with the Romans before again coming under suspicion and going over to Philip, at whose court he became so influential that he was almost the single biggest cause of that great kingdom's destruction.

It is clear that Polybius rather enjoys passing judgment on the people he dislikes, but they are usually much briefer comments than what we have so far observed. The Egyptian minister Sosibius, referred to in the passage just quoted, "appears to have been a dextrous instrument of evil who remained long in power and did much mischief in the kingdom" (15.25.1–2). This comment is followed by a list of people he murdered. When the Seleucid adviser Hermeias ("by nature a man of savage disposition"—5.41.3), finally met a violent end, Polybius feels he deserved worse: "so died Hermeias, meeting with a punishment by no means adequate to his crimes" (5.56.13). Dicaearchus the Aetolian, on the other hand, got exactly what he deserved (18.54.8–12). Appointed to the command of Philip V's treacherous attack on the Cyclades, he set up two altars, one to Impiety, the other to Lawlessness, and sacrificed to them as if they were divinities: "he therefore must be pronounced to have suffered the

punishment he deserved at the hands of gods and men; for having regulated his life by unnatural principles he met likewise with no natural death" (he was racked and scourged).

Relatively brief remarks of this sort abound. Hellenistic kings usually receive more detailed assessment, although rarely as hostile as in this obituary of Prusias II of Bithynia (36.15):

King Prusias was ugly of aspect, and though possessed of fair reasoning power, was but half a man as regards his appearance. In military matters he was despicable and womanly: for not only was he a coward, but he was incapable of putting up with hardship, and, to put it briefly, he was effeminate in body and mind throughout his whole life, a defect that no one, least of all the Bithynians, likes to see in a king. In addition, he was habitually licentious in satisfying his bodily desires; he was entirely a stranger to literature, philosophy and the systematic learning derived from these studies, and generally speaking had no notion of what beauty and goodness are, but lived by day and night the barbarous life of a Sardanapallus. So, the moment they saw the least chance of success, his subjects became irrevocably resolved not only to throw off allegiance to the king, but also to exact punishment from him.

The wealth of detail in this and other portraits of kings probably results from a well-known set of expectations in the Greek world of how a king should ideally look and behave. By pointing out how Prusias failed to meet so many of these standards, Polybius is perhaps trying to undermine any pretensions to Greekness Prusias may have had. The portraits of good monarchs like Massinissa of Numidia (36.16), Attalus I of Pergamum (18.41), his son Eumenes II (32.8), or Hiero of Syracuse (7.8) show up the contrast with Prusias. Prusias was very short and physically weak. Massinissa was stronger than all his contemporaries; he could stand or sit all day without moving and ride day and night without tiring; he was so physically fit that he had a son at the age of eighty-six and lived to ninety, having reigned for sixty years. A long reign and long and robust life are qualities Polybius admires in a king. Hiero too lived, sound in body and mind, into his nineties, ruling for fifty-four years; Attalus reigned for forty-four years and lived to the age of seventy-two.

Effective military leadership, or the maintenance of prosperous peace, was indispensable. Attalus conquered the Galatians and died while fighting for the liberty of Greece (although not in battle); Eumenes expanded his kingdom substantially; Hiero kept Syracuse at peace for his entire reign. Perhaps more important than war or peace was tranquillity at court and in one's family and the peaceful

transmission of power. It was the mark of a good monarch to attract no conspiracies (see [chapter 3](#)). Unruly sons were often a cause of plotting, as in the tragic case of Philip V of Macedon (23.10.13). Throughout his long life, on the other hand, Massinissa was free from plots, and domestic harmony prevailed among his ten children; the same applies to Attalus and to Eumenes, who kept his three brothers loyal; Hiero's children are not mentioned, but his reign was undisturbed by plots.

Sexual incontinence or deviance, coupled with alcohol abuse, were sure signs of a bad king. Prusias, we saw, lived the dissolute life of a Sardanapallus, the famous cross-dressing king of Nineveh. You would not find the manly Massinissa, father of ten, dressing up as a woman; and clean living kept Hiero fit, in the midst of luxury, affluence, and lavish expenditure. The lazy and ineffective Ptolemy IV Philopator of Egypt was so devoted to drink and sex that he ignored politics entirely (5.34.4–10). We might observe in passing that, as with many subjects, Polybius has a great deal to say about drunkenness. It is sometimes a barbarian problem. Agron, king of Illyria, was so pleased at defeating the Aetolians that he went on a drunken binge and died a few days later (2.4.6). Heavy drinking, day and night, led Genthius, another Illyrian king, into many brutal acts (29.13.2). Gauls tended to fight with each other so often because they drank too much (2.19.4). The Carthaginian mercenaries were a rough lot anyway, but especially when they got drunk (1.69.12). Greeks also succumbed. Dispirited by their decline, the Boeotians abandoned themselves to drunken parties (20.4.7) and even left money in their wills for this purpose (20.6.5). Polybius was worried that his protégé, the Seleucid prince Demetrius, was too fond of the bottle to escape from Rome (31.13.9); and later he reports that Demetrius was drunk most of the time (33.19.1). The great Seleucid king, Antiochus III, was also fond of getting drunk (20.8.3), although in his case it does not seem to have impaired his skills. Alcohol was not a prominent Roman vice. Gaius Livius had been drinking all afternoon when he lost Tarentum to Hannibal in 213 BC (8.27), but he is the only individual Roman singled out for mention. Time and again, however, drink is shown to be disastrous in military contexts. Morally, militarily, politically, drunkenness was a serious problem, and the rather stern Polybius condemned it consistently and repeatedly.

Hiero came to power as a completely self-made man: he had neither wealth nor power nor any other advantage; and Eumenes achieved success relying entirely on his own qualities of shrewdness, hard work, and energy. Money is fine if you have it and use it properly, but you should not be greedy to get it. Attalus was very wealthy, but he used his wealth solely to win power, quite justified in pursuit of such a

worthy ambition. Avarice makes fools of us, as Perseus and Eumenes demonstrated in their intrigues during the Third Macedonian War (29.9). It is interesting to note this criticism of Eumenes, to whom Polybius is mostly very well disposed, but he had explained at the beginning of the work that in pursuit of the truth a historian will sometimes have to praise and blame the same person, friend and foe alike, according to their deserts; “for,” as he judges in an opinion we may be tempted to regard as unjustifiably fair to politicians, “it is not possible that politicians should always be right, and it is improbable that they are always wrong” (1.14.7).

Intellectual attainments do not feature in Polybius’ other obituaries, so it is strange that Prusias comes under attack for his failings in this area. But a level of education, sensitivity to intellectual matters, and artistic taste are probably assumed as basic requirements in any able monarch, and Prusias was a complete philistine. There is no mention of any benefactions by him to Greek cities, and the language of benefaction given and received by both kings and cities was part of the essence of Hellenistic kingship. Hiero conferred huge benefits on the Greeks; Eumenes was a greater benefactor of the Greek cities than any king of his time; Attalus campaigned for Greek liberty. Massinissa’s benefactions to Greek cities are not mentioned, but his greatest achievement was to turn the previously barren land of Numidia into an agriculturally rich region—a sort of benefaction to the world.

Curiously, given Polybius’ intense interest in his career, there seems to be no death notice for Philip V of Macedon. There are, however, running assessments of his reign from time to time. Having introduced him gradually in book 4 as a young but effective monarch, Polybius stops to offer a first major assessment (4.77):

Philip, then, both by his behaviour to those with whom he was associated in the camp, and by his ability and daring in the field, was winning a high reputation among those serving with him and also among the rest of the Peloponnesians. For it would be difficult to find a king more richly endowed by nature with the qualities required for the attainment of power. He possessed a quick intelligence, a retentive memory, and great personal charm, as well as the presence and authority that becomes a king, and above all ability and courage as a general. What indeed it was that defeated all these advantages, and turned a king of such good natural qualities into a savage tyrant, is not easy to explain in a few words, and therefore the examination and discussion of the matter must be kept for a more suitable occasion than the present.

This theme of an able king who turns bad foreshadows, as we will see (in [chapter 3](#)), the rest of Polybius' account of Philip. In 4.82 Philip is still winning plaudits for the brilliance of his achievement beyond his years, but an important moment occurs at Thermum (5.9–12). Polybius analyzes at some length Philip's treatment of the town. Up to this point he had acted in accordance with the laws of war, but mindful of what the Aetolians had done at Dium and Dodona, he now replied in kind by destroying the town. Polybius thinks this was a mistake, and cites examples from previous Macedonian history that would have been better to follow. Taking into account Philip's tender years, perhaps we should apportion some of the blame to his advisers. This is not so much a character sketch as a pause for analysis of action, but it does advance the portrait of Philip.

Even more decisive is Philip's behavior at Messene (7.11–14):

Interrupting my narrative here, I wish to say a few words about Philip, as this was the beginning of the reversal of his character and his headlong change for the worse. It seems to me to be a very striking example for men of action who want to correct their standard of conduct, in however small a measure, by the study of history. For owing both to the splendour of his position and the brilliance of his genius, the good and evil impulses of this king were very conspicuous and very widely known throughout Greece.

Polybius goes on to note the striking loyalty he inspired at the beginning from all his subjects and his courtiers. He swiftly conferred so many benefits on all Greeks that you could call him "the darling of Greece." Even the Cretans united to elect him president of their island. After his attack on Messene, however, in which his arrival seems to have precipitated a massacre of magistrates and leading citizens (described in Plutarch's *Life of Aratus* 49; Polybius' account of the affair is lost), everything changed. Having gained a taste for human blood, he did not turn into a werewolf (as in a story told by Plato), but he did change from a king into a cruel tyrant. The effects of this change were seen, for instance, in his tyrannical sexual behavior (10.26):

He no longer confined himself to seducing widows or corrupting married women, but used to send for and order any woman he chose to come to him, and insulted those who did not at once obey his orders. . . and on the whole he behaved in a most outrageous and lawless manner.

In spite of this hostile opinion, Polybius still maintains that Philip's

good qualities were natural to him, whereas his faults were acquired over the passage of time, just like some horses when they get old.

When Ptolemy IV Philopator of Egypt died in 204, he left a young son, Ptolemy V Epiphanes, on the throne. Philip joined forces with Antiochus III of Syria to take advantage of the situation and carve up Egypt between them. Polybius was outraged by such treachery, but he was pleased to note how Fortune made them both pay for their sins (15.20). Philip's behavior in Cius too (15.22) "would rightly leave him a legacy of infamy throughout the whole of Greece as a violator of all that was sacred." As he moved from one treachery to another (15.24), the year 182 marked the beginning of the terrible misfortunes that afflicted him and his kingdom (23.10). For it was then that Fortune, wishing to punish him for all his wickedness, sent furies to torment him by day and night right up to the day of his death. In his derangement he deported politically active families, imprisoned the children of men he had murdered, and had to face the choice of which of his conspiratorial children to kill, which to fear most.

Major events in Philip's life—Thermum, Messene, the pact with Antiochus—offer opportunities for Polybius to pause and take stock of the king. These judgments are then reinforced by briefer comment in the course of the narrative.

The same applies to Roman leaders, although it has rightly been observed that Polybius seems much less comfortable in his assessment of Romans. Apart from identifying obvious qualities like courage, "just about the most essential virtue in any state and particularly in Rome" (31.29.1), or incorruptibility, Polybius did not have the same set of leadership attributes to apply to Romans as he did for Hellenistic kings. Perhaps he did not understand Rome well enough to make such a list, or, given his own situation as a prisoner in Rome, was too cautious to do so. We have already seen some of the extensive character portrait of the young Scipio Africanus at the time of his capture of New Carthage in 209. This is occasioned not just by curiosity about one of the most famous men in the world, but also by earlier incorrect assessments of him. Qualities identified in this character study then inform the account of his actual activities. Further illustration of his character is furnished on his death by three anecdotes Polybius relates about him. Africanus died in the same year (183/182) as Hannibal and the great Achaean leader Philopoemen, and Polybius used the opportunity to write comparative obituaries (23.12–14). These are not fully preserved, but evidently the three are portrayed as ideal leaders in different types of government—Philopoemen in a democracy, Scipio in an aristocracy, and Hannibal in a monarchy (in the sense that he was general with absolute power in an army on campaign).

As Rome's greatest and most dangerous opponent, and a man of complex personality, Hannibal is the subject of close scrutiny in a long passage of analysis in book 9 (22–26):

Since the narrative of affairs has drawn our attention to the character of Hannibal, it seems to me the right time to state my opinion regarding those peculiar traits of his which are the subject of most dispute. For some think that he was excessively cruel, and others that he was avaricious.

It is not easy, Polybius argues, to discover the truth about public figures. Some people say that power reveals a man's true character; Polybius, on the other hand, believes that "in most cases, men are forced to act and speak contrary to their real principles by the complexity of facts and by the suggestions of their advisers." Agathocles of Syracuse and Cleomenes of Sparta are adduced as examples of circumstances affecting behavior; Athens in the fifth century BC, Sparta in the fourth, and Philip V of Macedon provide examples of the influence of advisers. The circumstances facing Hannibal and the widely different character of his closest advisers make it very difficult to discover the real Hannibal. His ferocious namesake, Hannibal the Gladiator, who advised in council that the only way to feed the army on its march to Italy was to teach it cannibalism, was said to be responsible for many of the acts of cruelty attributed to Hannibal the general. And Mago, commander of the Carthaginian forces in Bruttium (the "toe" of Italy), seems to have been influential in promoting Hannibal's avarice. In relation to circumstances, Polybius describes how the difficulties facing Hannibal after the Roman capture of Capua forced him into actions that cannot necessarily be taken to show his real character. After a carefully structured and closely argued analysis of the themes of cruelty and avarice in Hannibal, Polybius fails to make up his mind. All he can say is that among the Carthaginians, Hannibal had a reputation for love of money, and among the Romans for cruelty.

In 160 there occurred the death of Lucius Aemilius Paullus, who defeated the Macedonian King Perseus in 167. This occasions not so much an obituary as an observation of Aemilius' incorruptibility (31.22): he was a man who brought more gold from Spain than anyone else and had the wealth of Macedon at his disposal, but died poor. Polybius' main interest at this point, however, is not Aemilius Paullus but his son, Scipio Aemilianus, and the story of Polybius' own friendship with, and guidance of, Aemilianus (31.23–30). In the same way that Hiero led a clean life in the midst of luxury, so too was the young Scipio uncorrupted by the decadence surrounding him. Greek influence tempted Roman youths into affairs with boys and

prostitutes, expensive musical entertainments, and banquets. Some paid as much as a talent for a boy and three hundred drachmas for a jar of salted fish. “This aroused the indignation of Cato,” Polybius reports approvingly (31.25.5a), “who once said in a public speech that it was the surest sign of deterioration in the state when pretty boys fetch more than fields, and jars of salted fish more than ploughmen.” Scipio, in contrast, controlled his appetites and within five years gained a reputation for discipline and temperance.

Scipio then moved on to establishing his financial probity, in which his father’s example set him on his way. When his aunt Aemilia died, she left him all her considerable wealth, which he immediately gave to his mother, much to the astonishment of Rome: “for,” Polybius notes, “absolutely no one there ever gives away anything to anyone if he can help it” (31.26.9). When part of the dowry owing to his aunts by adoption was still outstanding, he stepped in and paid it before it was due. When his father died and left him and his brother, Quintus Fabius Maximus, heirs to the estate, Aemilianus gave up his share, knowing that his brother was not as wealthy as he was. When Fabius wanted to put on a gladiatorial show, but could not afford to, Scipio provided the money. His mother then died, but rather than take back any of what he had given, Scipio left her estate to his sisters.

With moral excellence and financial generosity under his belt, so to speak, a reputation for courage was all that was needed. Aemilianus proved this in his zest for hunting, learned first in the game-filled wilderness of Macedonia. The whole point of this extended portrait, revealed at the end, is to secure the reader’s confidence in the accuracy of the coverage of Aemilianus in the following books.

Polybius speaks often and approvingly of the physical courage of leaders. He is quite prepared to criticize its absence, even when this affects someone he approves of. The elder Aratus of Sicyon, for example, one of Polybius’ great heroes, was a hopeless general and a coward. The result, expressed in memorable fashion, was that “he filled the Peloponnese with trophies commemorating his defeats” (4.8.6). Generals must be brave but not foolishly rash. We have already seen Scipio Africanus praised for the care he took of himself in battle. In the same way Hannibal receives the stamp of approval for never putting himself needlessly at risk (10.33), in contrast to that simpleton Marcus Claudius Marcellus, one of the consuls of 208, who got himself killed in a minor skirmish (10.32). When the battle is lost, a brave death is an honorable end—Hannibal’s brother Hasdrubal provides the best example of this (11.2.9–11). This is all very sensible, but slightly precious, and one wonders whether Polybius was a little sensitive on the issue. How often, if at all, had he actually fought in a battle? (see discussion in [chapter 4](#)).

Other Narrative Pauses

Not surprisingly, one of the subjects that brings Polybius to a narrative halt and attracts his discursive analysis is military matters. Generalship is a topic of abiding interest to him. In the account of the campaign leading up to the battle of Lake Trasimene in 217 BC, he stops to consider how wise Hannibal was to identify the weaknesses of the Roman commander Gaius Flaminius (3.81). It is vital in a general to observe the character and policy of his opponent carefully. Just as a soldier in battle looks for the physically unprotected part of the man facing him, so a general must look for the weakness in the mental armor of his counterpart. Laziness, drunkenness, and overindulgence in sex are nearly as ruinous in a general as cowardice and stupidity. They all lead to disaster. Rashness, anger, conceit, self-delusion are all simple to take advantage of: they make a commander easy prey to plotting, ambush, and deception. So the best general is the one who can identify and exploit to the full the weaknesses of his opponent.

A much longer and more elaborately systematic analysis of the art of military leadership is to be found in book 9 (12–20). Here the ultimate recommendation is that generals must know something of astronomy and geometry, but there are other requirements as well. Military operations need a starting time, a duration, a place, as well as secrecy, proper signals, and qualified people through whom to act. A general who gets all these matters right will not fail, but success depends on all of them: a single fault can undermine the whole venture. Secrecy is of primary importance—plans must be communicated only to those who need to know—and it is not only words that communicate intentions; even facial expression can give things away. Second comes knowledge of night and day movement by land and sea. Third is timing, and last signaling, along with choice of personnel. It is best if a general himself knows the terrain and personnel, although he can find out by careful inquiry. A certain amount is learned by experience, but some technical knowledge is necessary. Astronomy is needed to calculate the exact length of day and night. If you do not have that information, correct timing is impossible. Although it is always better to arrive too early rather than too late, timing is important. You have to know the solstices and equinoxes, and the divisions of day and night. Day is just a matter of common sense, but night requires a basic knowledge of the constellations and the moon. We must be as careful as Odysseus, that most capable of generals. There are sufficient unexpected difficulties, like floods, snow, and fog, that we cannot do anything about; it is crucial, therefore, to make sure that we attend to what is foreseeable.

Polybius then highlights some mistakes made by famous generals.

Aratus, when trying to capture Cynaetha, failed to make adequate signaling arrangements. Cleomenes, having arranged to take Megalopolis by treachery, did not know his astronomy and, misled by the shortness of the night, set out from Sparta too late to arrive at the agreed time. Philip V, on the other hand, arrived at Melitaea too early, when the inhabitants were still awake—he was supposed to come at midnight—and then he found that he could not take it by storm because his scaling ladders were too short. The Athenian general Nicias, when besieging Syracuse in 413, failed to consult with astronomers and lost the opportunity to save his army (a rather garbled version of what Thucydides [7.50.3] reports, probably produced from memory). Getting the length of scaling ladders right is a matter of basic geometry, as is designing military camps (elsewhere, Polybius includes how to estimate the size of cities: in this task, politicians and generals must remember the simple geometry lessons they learned in school—9.26a). The rest is astronomy. These are not onerous demands. If you are going to learn to dance or play the flute, you have to study the theory of rhythm and music and do some physical training; so it is hardly too much to require that those who aspire to the command of armies must gain some slight acquaintance with other sciences.

Generals must also be very careful about whom they trust (8.35–36). In 212 the Roman commander Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was ambushed and killed, deceived, we learn from Livy (25.15–16), by the Lucanian leader, Flavus. Should we blame or pardon people like Sempronius? Polybius provides examples. The Spartan King Archidamas deserved to lose his throne and his life, as he put himself in the power of Cleomenes, whom he knew to be dangerous. Pelopidas of Thebes knew perfectly well how treacherous Alexander of Pherae was, but he still entrusted himself to him. Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio, one of the consuls of 260, unwisely surrendered to the Carthaginians. Generals have to trust someone, and they can only take the greatest care to extract pledges for their safety. If they do that and are still betrayed, they cannot be blamed.

Another military matter to which Polybius devotes a long and highly technical analysis is fire signaling (10.43–47), a skill in which he himself had considerable expertise. He describes the advances made by the fourth-century BC tactical writer, Aeneas, and then the improvements of Cleoxenus and Democleitus, perfected by himself. The superiority of Roman wooden stakes over Greek ones for making a palisade is discussed in book 18 (18.18). As we saw in the introduction, Polybius uses Scipio Africanus' capture of New Carthage in book 10 to describe the Roman system of plundering a captured town and dividing up the booty. There he admires the system, but

when Syracuse fell in 211 during the war against Hannibal, Polybius criticizes Rome for despoiling the city of its artistic treasures (9.10). His consideration is practical: was it in Rome's interest to do this? The answer is "no," on two interconnected counts. First, Rome had not grown great by relying on such luxuries; second, they attract envy and hatred. It is a mistake to abandon the methods that brought empire in the first place and take up the ways of the conquered: that, as we will see ([chapter 4](#)), is the road to imperial decline.

War and military affairs can give rise to interesting analogies. A mutiny in Scipio's army in Spain in 206 suggests to Polybius a comparison with internal and external afflictions of the human body: mutinies and internal sedition, like bodily growths and abscesses, are much harder to deal with than external threats (11.25). Ulcers and tumors are also used to characterize the moral degradation of the Carthaginian mercenaries (1.81.5–11). Early in the Third Macedonian War, the victory of Perseus over Roman troops in an engagement known as the battle of Callinicus led to an explosion of support for him. Polybius draws a comparison with a boxing match in which a rank outsider faces a celebrated and seemingly invincible opponent: naturally, the crowd immediately favors the underdog (27.9–10). Polybius allows this digressive simile to pull him into such extended detail that he almost seems to forget about Perseus. Crowds, he notes, can be persuaded to change their mind, as happened in a famous match at the Olympic Games between the apparently unbeatable Greek champion Cleitomachus and his Ptolemaic challenger Aristonicus. The crowd were delirious with excitement when the outsider Aristonicus got some good punches in, but Cleitomachus cleverly appealed to their patriotism—did they want to see an Egyptian crowned champion rather than a Boeotian from Thebes, he asked them—and, having won back their support, also won the bout. Similarly now with Perseus, although the Greeks were delighted that at last someone was able to challenge Rome, if you pointed out to them, Polybius suggests, the troubles that Macedon had caused them, they would surely have changed their mind. The purpose of this digression, he goes on, was to explain how human nature works in these situations so that people do not reproach the Greeks unfairly for their frame of mind at this time.

A series of three similes helps Polybius avoid describing in detail the stalemate toward the end of the First Punic War (1.57–59). The two sides are compared to evenly matched boxers, and although Fortune, like a good umpire, changed the nature of the contest in an attempt to get a result, that did not work, and the contestants ended up like fighting cocks, who lose the use of their wings and eventually grasp each other in a death hold, until one or other is overcome.

Politics for Polybius, especially given the times about which he was writing, was closely linked to war. The attitudes and policies of Greek politicians in relation to Rome and its actions were obviously of central concern in his assessment of affairs, especially in the later books, which are now so imperfectly preserved. Even here, very important discussions survive. In an analysis, for instance, of the behavior of Deinon and Polyaratus, leaders of the anti-Roman party in Rhodes, Polybius examines in some detail the stance taken by different politicians in the Greek states (30.6–9). His purpose, he says, is didactic (30.9.20):

If I am asked why I have dealt at such length with the case of Polyaratus and Deinon, it was not in order to gloat over their misfortunes—that would be wholly inappropriate—but that by exhibiting clearly their lack of wisdom, I might make those who happen to find themselves in a similar situation better prepared to act advisedly and wisely.

Similarly, Greek attitudes to Rome's treatment of Carthage and the Macedonian pretender Andriscus are carefully assessed in book 36 (9–10).

Polybius' thoughts about the characteristics of national or regional groups are often embedded in his narrative—character is revealed by what he describes people as doing, and by passing judgments—but sometimes the subject of a group's character elicits special treatment. In the early stages of the Social War, the Aetolians captured the Arcadian town of Cynaetha, and there follows a fascinating analysis of the character of the Cynaethans (4.20–21). Although they were undoubtedly Arcadians, whose virtue was held in high regard, the people of Cynaetha had a reputation as the most savage of all Greeks and were generally thought to have thoroughly deserved their rough handling by the Aetolians. That physical environment is a major influence on character was an idea that went back at least to the fifth century BC, and this idea informs Polybius' analysis. Arcadia was a harsh place, of cold and gloomy climate, and it made its inhabitants harsh and gloomy. Recognizing this, the ancient men of Arcadia introduced music to all areas of society, not as a luxury entertainment, but as a necessity, "to render more gentle and mild . . . the extreme hardness of the national character." The Cynaethans, who had the roughest terrain and harshest climate in Arcadia, neglected these musical institutions and as a result descended into savagery.

This discussion has been designed firstly to ensure that the character of the Arcadian nation should not be criticized for the crimes of one city, and secondly to deter any other Arcadians

from beginning to neglect music in the belief that its extensive practice in Arcadia is superfluous. I was also thinking of the Cynaethans, so that if Heaven ever grant them better fortune, they may civilize themselves by turning their attention to education and especially to music; for this is the only way can they hope to put an end to the savagery which overtook them at this time.

Abandoning the ways of the past is also a theme that underlies Polybius' treatment of Elis (4.73–74). On his campaigning in the Peloponnese in 219, Philip entered the territory of Elis, and Polybius stops to consider its particular characteristics. Traditionally the Eleans presided over the Olympic Games and enjoyed immunity from attack in this role. This neutrality enabled them to lead a peaceful agrarian life, with some of them never showing their faces in the law courts in town for generations; the politicians protected this ideal existence. Later, they came into conflict with Arcadia for possession of Lasion and Pisa and had to abandon the life of peace they had previously enjoyed. Polybius is critical of them for never seeking to recover their neutrality. He thinks they could have done so and that it would have been much better for them.

Structure and Contents

I end this chapter with some thoughts on the structure and rationale of the first five books. I refer the reader to the appendix, where I have set out a schematic analysis of these books and drawn attention to some of the more substantial sections that survive from the rest of the work.

Each of the first three books forms a discrete entity in terms of structure and, perhaps to a lesser extent, contents, although, as we have seen, books 1 and 2 stand together as an introduction to the history proper. After introductory plans for the work as a whole, and background material for the First Punic War, book 1 has a simple bipartite structure, divided between the First Punic War and the conflict that Carthage faced immediately afterward: economically stretched by the war against Rome, Carthage was unable to pay her large force of mercenaries who revolted and proved very difficult to suppress. These two wars form a neat contrast in moral character. Polybius is at pains to emphasize how Rome and Carthage, both “still uncorrupted in morals” (1.13.12), fought nobly against each other. The Roman decision to take the battle to sea, at a time when they knew nothing of building ships, showed their spirit and incredible

daring (1.20.12–13). After two defeats, and with Regulus on their doorstep, the Carthaginians found themselves in dire straits, but their senate still turned down Regulus' fierce terms, displaying "such manly dignity that rather than submit to anything ignoble or unworthy of their past, they were willing to suffer anything and to face every exertion and every extremity" (1.31.8). The performance of both sides was marked by enterprise, lofty spirit, and ambition (1.64.5).

The mercenary war, on the other hand, was a bitter and treacherous struggle, a good example of what Polybius refers to as a "truceless war" (1.65). It showed the big difference between "a confused herd of barbarians and men who had been brought up in an educated, law-abiding and civilized community." He claims that it was crucial for understanding the causes of the Hannibalic war, but it is difficult to see how. It enabled Rome to grab Sardinia without Carthaginian response—and that was one of the major causes of the Second Punic War—but a detailed account of the mercenary war was scarcely necessary to make that point. Possibly Polybius simply wanted to tell this story and sought justification for doing so. More probably, it illustrates a sustained engagement with the problems of employing mercenaries that was suggested and heavily influenced by the famous story of the march of the 10,000 recounted in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (see [chapter 2](#)). The barbarism of the mercenaries is highlighted by language: they all spoke different languages, so it was impossible to talk to them together (1.67.7–9). They advanced from one act of savagery to another. In a drunken state they stoned to death anyone who disagreed with them, the words "stone them" being the only ones they all understood (1.69.10–14); their victims are described as "destroyed as if by wild beasts" (1.80.10). Gisco, the chief Carthaginian negotiator, and 700 other captives meet a gruesome end: their hands and other extremities are cut off, their legs broken, and they are thrown in a ditch (1.81.11–13). In time the rebels resort to cannibalism (1.84.9–12). The Carthaginians respond with ferocity, too, crucifying one of the rebel leaders, Spendius, and ten hostages at the walls of Tunis before the rebels respond in kind (1.86.4–9). This war, Polybius concludes, far exceeded all others in cruelty and lawlessness (1.88.7).

The first book serves to introduce the reader to the two main protagonists that start the history proper in 220 and finish it in 146 BC, Rome and Carthage. Rome's imperial ambitions had their origins earlier in the third century BC—and the first clash with Carthage was an important part of that story—but the war against Hannibal was a good starting point to describe Rome's headlong rush to world power. Although evenly fought, the First Punic War did highlight a fundamental weakness in the Carthaginian military—their reliance on

mercenaries. And the severe difficulty they had in suppressing the revolt of their mercenaries was far from an impressive display of power.

The second book, while reminding us that trouble was brewing in Spain, is largely about drawing our attention to Greece—the Illyrian war was Rome's first military expedition there—and particularly to the Achaean League, which dominates Polybius' attention and to a certain extent might be said to distort his historical judgment. There is no doubt that Rome's movement into Greece was an important step on the road to empire, but it could be argued that a focus on Macedon, which is treated largely from an Achaean perspective, would have better represented the challenge Rome faced across the Adriatic. In the dramatic half century that Polybius identifies as the crucial period of imperial growth, in Greece it was not the Achaean League that confronted Roman armies but Macedon. Polybius' Achaean focus can also clearly be seen in a decision not to give any background information, before Olympiad 140, on the history of Asia and Egypt (2.37). The reasoning is that the history of the East is well known because so many have written about it; and anyway, not much of interest appened before Olympiad 140. This is a little lame considering that the mighty Seleucid empire, and potentially Egypt, posed the biggest threat to Roman dominance of the East.

Book 2 presents four topics to complete the introduction: Carthaginian expansion in Spain, Rome's first venture in Illyria, the conquest of northern Italy, and the history of Greece. Structurally Illyria, Italy, and Greece form the three major units of the book; Spain is briefly inserted between these units, just to remind us of its importance. These occasional references are a nice literary reflection of the real situation—just as the Romans were worried about Spain but could do nothing about it because of the Gallic threat in Italy (2.13; 22), so Polybius has it on his mind, but has to follow the Gallic story. The reasons behind Polybius' account of Rome's conquest of the Gauls of northern Italy are sound. Before facing down Carthage, Rome must secure her own safety in Italy; northern Italy is going to be the first vital theater of the Hannibalic war. In addition, there is perhaps a correspondence intended with the mercenary war of book 1: that was how the Carthaginians dealt with their internal troubles; here now is the much more impressive story of how Rome dealt with hers. The most striking parts of the account are the excursus on the geography and resources of northern Italy (2.14–16), the analysis of the enormous manpower at Rome's disposal (23–24), and the description of the battle of Telamon (27–30).

Coverage of the Illyrian War concentrates largely on three brief set pieces. The first concerns the enjoyable (to Polybius) reversal of

fortune suffered by the Aetolians besieging the town of Medion. Elections for the generalship of the Aetolians were just coming up, and there was a dispute between the incumbent and the candidates for office about whose name should be inscribed on the ceremonial shields celebrating the inevitable capture of Medion. In the event, the inhabitants of the town defeated the Aetolians and decided to inscribe the shields as being won from (not by) the Aetolian general and candidates (2.3–4). The lesson from this? Never treat the future as if it were the present.

The second story is about the town of Phoenice in Epirus. It was garrisoned by Gauls, who betrayed it to an invading Illyrian force. When the Epirots came to get it back, they were defeated, and asked the Aetolians and Achaeans for help. In the face of this relief expedition, the Illyrians withdrew, ransoming Phoenice back to the Epirots. To compound their initial stupidity in entrusting the town to Gauls (of whose treacherous past Polybius provides some good examples), the Epirots then made an alliance with the Illyrians. This reveals another basic lesson: never admit a garrison stronger than your own forces, particularly if it is made up of barbarians.

The third section involves Rome's expedition against Illyria. The most interesting role is that of the aggressive Queen Teuta, whose murder of the spirited young Roman envoy brave enough to speak his mind to her started the war (2.8).

Even if Polybius' Achaean emphasis is a little blinkered, the unification of the Peloponnese under the aegis of the league, but ultimately with Macedonian backing, certainly forms part of the process of how history began to flow into one stream after 220 BC. Polybius tells the story with characteristic clarity (2.37–70). The account moves smoothly from a description of the league's basic character and constitution, to its early history and then renewal and development starting in the 124th Olympiad (284/3–281/0). Amid the account of how particular states were subsequently brought into the league, there develops a higher level tension between the Aetolians, the Macedonians, and the Achaeans. The aggressions of Cleomenes III of Sparta bring the question of inter-Greek relationships to a head, leading to the formation of a new alliance of Greek federal states under the leadership of Antigonos Doson, king of Macedon. In due course this new alliance defeats Cleomenes, who flees and eventually dies, a forlorn figure, in Alexandria. The account of the details of the Cleomenean war is enlivened by Polybius' sustained assault on the reliability of one of the other sources for the war, the historian Phylarchus (56–63).

Book 3 has a single story line, the Second Punic War. Not only is it a source of exceptional importance for the early part of the war against

Hannibal; it is also in many ways a fine piece of analytical and narrative history writing. Polybius' treatment of causation has not always been regarded as entirely successful, but it would be difficult to find in ancient literature a more thorough and careful investigation into the background of a major conflict—even if, ultimately, no firm conclusion is reached. The analysis of the causes and beginnings of the war (3.6–32) starts and finishes with important theoretical discussions; the distinction between causes, pretexts, and beginnings (3.6–7); and the value of finding out “the why, the how and the wherefore” of events in the context of universal history (3.31–32). In between, the causes (8–12) are followed by the beginnings (13–20). In the latter section there is coverage of Rome's second Illyrian war (3.16; 18–19). This is hardly a beginning of the war with Hannibal, but it is highly relevant background: just as Rome could not pay attention to Spain in book 2 until the north of Italy was secured, so now Roman policy required the securing of their rear in Illyria before they could turn against Hannibal. Polybius does not explicitly state the pretexts, but accusations by both sides of treaty breaking are clearly relevant to the issue, and the review of previous treaties between Rome and Carthage (21–28) is presented as a matter of great importance.

Hannibal's remarkable march from Spain to Italy, followed by his victorious progress to the battle of Cannae, make for a brilliant narrative. The account is punctuated by important geographical digressions (3.36–39; 47–48; 57–59) and by an occasional visit to the Spanish theater of operations (3.76; 95–99): both tend to delay the main action and build the tension. Cannae fortuitously coincided with the end of the Olympiad, and Polybius took the opportunity offered to bring the book to an exciting close, a perfect moment to suspend the story at a particularly tense time, thus enticing the reader back when the war narrative resumes in full three books later.

In their review of Greek and eastern Mediterranean affairs up to the end of Olympiad 140, books 4 and 5 form a continuous story, linked by the account of the conspiracy of the powerful Macedonian courtier Apelles and his associates against Philip, which ends book 4 and starts book 5. The two books also enjoy a broad parallelism of structure. The Social War provides the framework, forming the beginning and end of each book. In between, each contains one other major item, and one or two minor items. The reasons for the choice of subject are not always obvious. Why Crete, for instance (4.53–55)? It is an account of local disputes, which in the larger scale of Mediterranean history look distinctly unimportant. Or Sinope (4.56)? It is not even clear that Mithradates attacked the city—the text just says the inhabitants were afraid he would. There may be a thematic link in Rhodes. Having

decided to cover the war involving Rhodes, Bithynia, and Byzantium, perhaps Polybius was drawn first to Crete and then Sinope by the embassies that the inhabitants of Cnossus and of Sinope sent to Rhodes. A Rhodian source might explain the actual procedure of Polybius, but it scarcely justifies the choice. Even more problematic is the earthquake at Rhodes (5.88–90), which is certainly not in its chronologically correct place. What we do not know is whether Polybius picked up these topics in the later, lost books. The answer may well lie there, but at least one explanatory factor in the choice of these subjects comes to mind: the theme of international intervention that the events, although local, attract. The Rhodians played a clever game as victims of their disastrous earthquake, Polybius says, and lavish aid from the Greek world poured into the damaged city, from Hiero and Gelo in Sicily, from Ptolemy III Euergetes, Antigonos and Seleucus, Pontus and Bithynia, local Asian dynasts, and various cities too numerous to count. In Crete, Cnossus asked the Rhodians and the Aetolians for help; others sent to Philip and the Achaeans. Perhaps the relevance of the local disputes in Crete or of the Rhodian earthquake is that they were pulling the main players of Greek history together. Greek history, then, was beginning to flow into one stream, as part of the wider confluence of Mediterranean history. In the case of Sinope, only the Rhodians are drawn into the affair, but it is a brief account, and we probably need explanation from lost sections of the work.

This chapter, I hope, has begun to convey an impression of the scope and variety of Polybius' *Histories*, how the work hangs together, and how the author actually proceeds. I will examine the narrative of books 4 and 5 in more detail in [chapter 3](#), but I turn now to a topic never far from Polybius' attention—how to write history.

Further Reading

Readers who may feel the need of a general history of Rome might profitably consult Boatwright, Gargola, Talbert (2004); alternatively, a good option would be Cornell (1995) for the period up to the wars of Rome against Carthage, and Shipley (2000) or Walbank (1992) for the Hellenistic age (323–30 BC). On Polybius' basic procedures as a historian, Pédech (1964) is fundamental but very detailed; a lighter touch will be found in, for instance, Walbank (1972), Luce (1997), or Marincola (2001). On the synchronisms of books 4 and 5, see Walbank (1974). Helpful on character sketches/obituaries is Pomeroy (1986). Herman (1997) is very good on Hellenistic courts and courtiers. Much has been written about Hellenistic kings: Ma (2003) is a stimulating guide. On drunkenness see Eckstein (1995, 285–89). On Philip as a

figure of tragedy see Walbank (1938). On the cultural characteristics of national groups in Polybius, Champion (2004) is an important new work.

2

The Historian's Task

As we have already observed, Polybius says more about writing history, and is more opinionated on the subject, than any other surviving historian from antiquity. Scope and subject matter, drama, rhetoric and speeches, usefulness and truth, methodology, causation, the qualifications needed by the historian, analysis of predecessors' works, the role of Fate—these and many other matters come under his careful scrutiny. His most concentrated analysis of how to write history (and how not to write it) comes in book 12, which is entirely devoted to the subject, although it is not at all clear whether its main purpose is to attack the Sicilian historian Timaeus or to set out in a more constructive way Polybius' own views on the writing of history. In any case, important thoughts are also scattered throughout the work, wherever he allows the context to lead him into consideration of the issues. Although not all his views are admired for their sophistication or consistency, this aspect of Polybius makes him particularly fascinating for us, if only because so few other historians of the ancient world have much to say about what they thought they were doing or should be doing.

Polybius' Predecessors

Where does Polybius stand in the tradition of Greek history writing? Out of what does his work emerge? He was very conscious of past tradition and of his place in it, but the nature of his relationship with his predecessors is tricky to assess, for two reasons. First, the most famous of them, Herodotus and Thucydides (and to a lesser extent Xenophon), are also the most distant, covering events that happened well before the period treated by Polybius. So, while they might, of course, influence his methods and views, their works do not constitute source material for what he was writing. He did not need to consult

them, although for a highly educated Greek gentleman, these and the other classics of Greek literature would have been familiar reading. Second, and rather more serious, the historians closer to Polybius' own time, to the immediate context that produced him, who wrote about events also covered by him, and whose works he must have used heavily, do not survive. Indeed, in many cases, the little we know of them comes largely from Polybius' comments about them, which tend to be highly self-serving. A polemical assessment of one's predecessors was entirely normal by the second century BC, so when you do not have the actual works assessed, it is extremely difficult to make an accurate judgment of their nature. Although a great deal of interesting work has been done on the subject, and we are aware of the shadow cast by Polybius' contemporaries on him (and vice versa), it is almost inevitable that his survival makes him appear exceptional.

It has in the past been argued that Polybius seems hardly to have entered the thought-world of Herodotus, but this is a view that now looks less convincing. It is true that there is no mention of Herodotus in the surviving text, and when Polybius cites examples from earlier Greek history, it is predominantly from the fourth and third centuries BC that he takes them; but there are signs that Herodotean influence filtered its way into his work. Let us examine a few examples.

Shortly after he succeeded to the Seleucid throne in 223 BC, Antiochus III faced a revolt from his governor of Media, named Molon, and called a council meeting to discuss countermeasures. He invited an open discussion, only to find his two senior courtiers, Hermeias and Epigenes, develop a sharp disagreement (5.41–42). It would be difficult to deny that this scene owes its form, quite possibly directly, to the similar situation at the beginning of Herodotus book 7, where Xerxes calls on his courtiers to give their opinion on his proposed invasion of Greece, and a row develops between Mardonius and Artabanus.¹ The similarity between the two scenes is extensive: Polybius seems to have drawn heavily on Herodotus, even consciously borrowing or subconsciously inheriting some of Herodotus' language.

Similarly, Polybius' description of the way in which Hannibal bridged the River Rhône on his march from Spain to Italy (3.46) bears a close resemblance to Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont in 480 BC (Hdt. 7.36). Perhaps there are not many options when building a pontoon bridge across a long stretch of water, but the repetition of technical details—binding the rafts together, anchoring them to the land, dealing with the current, covering the pontoon with soil, bringing the animals across—gives the two accounts a very similar feel. And of course, the situations are eminently comparable: two great foreign leaders, both ultimately unsuccessful, bringing an army of invasion across water, one from the far east, the other from the far

west. Polybius does not create any extended analogy of Xerxes and Hannibal, as their stories develop rather differently, even if they both end in similar failure, but it hardly seems fanciful to suggest that with this crossing of the Rhône Polybius was presenting Hannibal, in some sense, as Rome's Xerxes.

The River Nile fascinated Herodotus (2.17–34), as it did explorers right into the nineteenth century. Its great mysteries were its sources, and what it was “that made it behave in the opposite way from all other rivers”—that is, why it flooded in summer rather than winter. When Polybius describes the River Euphrates (9.43), we learn that it too did exactly the same and “has a nature the reverse of most other rivers.”² Both the Greek language (as I have indicated in the note) and the situation are too similar to be accidental, as is at least one of the explanations for the phenomenon offered by Herodotus. Although he dismisses it as nonsensical, he does report the claim “that the water of the Nile comes from melting snow” (in Greek, *apo tekomenes chionos*, 2.22.1). So, too, Polybius (9.43) offers the same explanation for the Euphrates—“its rise is not due to the conflux of winter rains, but to the melting of snow” (*ek tes anatexeos chionos*)—although in this case he believes it. There can be little doubt that Polybius' account of the Euphrates owes much, consciously or subconsciously, to Herodotus' description of the Nile.

It could be argued that this sort of Herodotean resonance is only occasional and does not reveal a deep-seated influence, but it is possible that there are Polybian themes that owe slightly more to Herodotus. Polybius' thoughts, for example, on the envious and changeable character of Fate or Chance (*tyche* in Greek; I discuss its use in more detail in [chapter 5](#)), seem to echo those of Herodotus. At the end of the work, Polybius wishes for his own continued prosperity, “seeing, as I do, how apt Fate is to envy men, and how she especially wields her power in cases where we think that our life has been most blessed and successful” (39.8.2). This sentiment recurs at various places throughout the work. In the First Punic War, the dramatic reversal of Regulus' good fortune made clear the wisdom of “distrusting Fate, especially when we are enjoying success” (1.35.2). “It seems to me, as the proverb has it, that it is possible for a human being to enjoy success, but impossible for him to enjoy it the whole time” (23.12.4)—this on the death by poisoning of Philopoemen, who had previously enjoyed outstandingly good fortune. We have already seen how Antiochus III wept at the fate of the Seleucid pretender, Achaeus, struck by how difficult it was to protect oneself against Fate and its unexpected nature (8.20.9–11). Scipio did the same at Carthage (38.21), it being the mark of a great man at the time of his greatest success “to reflect on our own situation and on the possible

reversal of circumstances, and generally to bear in mind when enjoying success the mutability of Fate.”

This all sounds very like Solon instructing Croesus in Herodotus book 1. “When you asked me about men and their affairs, Croesus, you were putting your question to someone who is well aware of how utterly jealous the divine is, and how likely it is to confound us” (1.32.1); “it is impossible for a mere mortal to have all these blessings at the same time” (1.32.8). Herodotus’ Amasis writes the same to Polycrates of Samos in book 3: “I worry about your remarkable good fortune, because I know that the gods are jealous of success. . . . I have never heard tell of a single case of someone doing well in everything who did not end up utterly and horribly destroyed” (3.40). Are these sentiments just tired clichés by Polybius’ time, or do they reveal a Herodotean ancestry in Polybius’ mental make-up? I think a certain similarity in the language may suggest the latter.

Mention of the Euphrates does bring up the subject of Polybius’ geography, to which I return later in this chapter. But the mere prominence of geography and geographical thinking in Polybius, and more specifically the integration of geography and history, are heavily reminiscent of Herodotus. Just describing the characteristics of the Euphrates in the way he does, even without its echoes of the Nile, is Herodotean. Polybius tells us that the Straits of Gibraltar are wider than the straits between Abydos and Sestos on the Hellespont, in the same proportion as the Atlantic is bigger than the Mediterranean (16.29.5). This sort of natural geographical balance at each end of the Mediterranean seems to represent a mode of thinking very like that displayed by Herodotus (2.33–34) in his estimate of the similar length and direction of the Nile and the Danube (not knowing the sources of the Nile, he assumed that its direction balanced that of the Danube). As another example, consider Polybius’ description of the fertility of the north Italian plain (2.15) and Herodotus’ assessment of Babylonia’s rich land (1.193). Here is Polybius:

It produces such an abundance of grain that in the present day the price of wheat was often four obols per Sicilian *medimnos*, and that of barley two obols, a *metretes* of wine costing the same as a *medimnos* of barley. Panic [a type of grass] and millet are produced in enormous quantities, while the quantity of acorns that are grown in the woods dispersed over the plain can be estimated from the fact that, while the number of pigs slaughtered in Italy both for private consumption and to feed the army is very large, almost all of them come from this plain. The cheapness and abundance of all articles of food can most clearly be understood from the fact that travellers in this country who

put up at inns do not bargain for each separate article they require, but ask what is the charge per day. As a rule, innkeepers take in guests, providing them with all they require, for half an as (i.e., a quarter of an obol) per day.

Here is Herodotus:

Cereal crops flourish here better than anywhere else we know of. While they do not even begin to grow other plants, such as figs, vines, and olive-trees, cereal crops grow so well that a yield of 200 times the weight of the seed grain is not unusual and, when the soil is exceptionally fertile, the yield can increase to 300 times the weight of the seed grain. In this country blades of wheat and barley grow to a width of at least four fingers. I am not going to mention the size of the plants that grow from millet-seed and sesame-seed although I know how big they are, because I am well aware of the sceptical response even my account of the crops has evoked in those who have not been to the Babylonian countryside.

I am not suggesting that Polybius' account recalls in any specifics that of Herodotus, merely that we seem to be in the same thought-world. Polybius emphasizes the richness of northern Italy by referring to the cheap price of grain, the abundance of acorns and resulting pork industry, and the all-in pricing system of hotel accommodation in the area; Herodotus illustrates Babylonia's fertility by drawing attention to its extraordinary crop yields. Personal experience is brought into play, too. Polybius clearly relies on his own experience when he refers to the price of accommodation; Herodotus certainly claims personal knowledge of the size of the crops in Babylonia. As we will see later, research in the field was a crucial part of history writing in Polybius' opinion: there could be no better exemplar than Herodotus.

Another Polybian interest that arises in the context of a brief geographical description looks distinctly Herodotean in concept and execution. I refer to his concern for works of art. During the Peloponnesian campaigns of Philip V of Macedon in the Social War (220–217 BC), the king at one point arrived at the city of Alipheira in Arcadia (4.78.3–5).

This city lies on a hill with cliffs on all sides, the ascent of which is more than ten stades. It has a citadel on the summit of the whole hill and a bronze statue of Athena, remarkable for its size and beauty. The origin of the statue—for what reason and at whose expense it was made—is a subject of dispute among the natives themselves, as there is nothing to show definitely who

dedicated it and why; but all agree on the excellence of the workmanship, as it is one of the most magnificent and artistic statues in existence, the work of Hecatomorus and Sostratus.

This passage could almost have come straight out of Herodotus, whose interest in statues and works of art is often expressed in a very similar manner. Just to take one example, we might cite some of Croesus' dedications at Delphi (Herodotus 1.51):

[He sent off] two huge bowls, one of gold, one of silver. The golden one used to stand on the right as you go into the temple, the silver one on the left. . . . The Delphians say that the silver one was made by Theodorus of Samos, and I agree: for it seems to me an exceptional work. Croesus also sent four silver jars, which stand in the Treasury of the Corinthians. In addition he dedicated two lustral bowls, a gold one and a silver one. On the golden one is an inscription claiming that it is a dedication of the Spartans, but this is not right: for it too was one of Croesus' offerings, and a Delphian wrote the inscription wishing to please the Spartans. I know the man's name, but I won't mention it.

It may well be that this sort of writing in a work of history was to be found in the works of Polybius' lost contemporaries and fourth-century BC predecessors, but the pattern was established originally by Herodotus.

One further point to note from the Herodotus passage concerning the fertility of Babylonia just quoted: the personal intervention of the author. If Polybius is conspicuous for thinking out loud, the writer to whom he is most similar in this practice is Herodotus. In both of them, the bold intrusion of the narrator is strikingly different from other historical writing that survives from the ancient world. In Polybius' case, this seems very much to be in character: that is the person he was. I would argue that in this, and in his attitude to the place in history of geography, ethnography, art, and Fate, while Polybius shares in the debates and methods of his own times, he has also absorbed, even if unconsciously or not fully consciously, some of the thinking, approach, and manner of his great predecessor, Herodotus.

Polybius' debt to the other giant of fifth-century BC history writing, Thucydides, is also elusive, but in my opinion real. He only mentions him once in the surviving text, just to say that the historian Theopompus began his work at the point where Thucydides ended his (8.11.3). The clearest echo of Thucydides is usually taken to be when Polybius says that if you omit analysis from history (so that it becomes a mere narrative), "you are left with a prize essay [*agonisma*], but not a lesson [*mathema*], and while pleasing for the moment, of no possible

benefit for the future” (3.31.12–13). In a famous passage, Thucydides expresses the hope that his work will be judged useful by those who want to understand past and future events: his history, so he claims, “is a possession for ever, not a prize essay [*agonisma*] written for present gratification” (1.22.4). The Greek word *agonisma* is not common, the thinking is very similar, and it would be perverse to argue that Polybius does not have Thucydides in mind here. The same contrast between pleasant reading for the moment and usefulness for the future recurs later in Polybius (38.4.8). So, too, his distinction between cause, pretext, and beginning (3.6–7) is usually thought to echo and attempt to develop Thucydides’ famous distinction between the truest cause of the Peloponnesian War (Spartan fear of Athens) and the particular circumstances out of which the war arose (1.23.5–6). These themes—the indispensable nature of truth in history writing, charming but short-lived works contrasted to immortal heavyweights, the usefulness of history, causation—are big ones; and in relation to them, although he does not constantly refer to Thucydides, Polybius is undoubtedly his heir.

There are also echoes of Thucydidean scenes. In 250 BC, in the course of the First Punic War, Roman forces undertook a siege of the Carthaginian stronghold Lilybaeum at the western end of Sicily (1.44). The Carthaginians sent a relief expedition by sea, which should have been intercepted by the Roman blockading fleet, but managed to sail straight into the harbor:

The whole population [*to d’ek tes poleos plethos*] had assembled on the walls in an *agony* of suspense on the one hand as to what would happen, and at the same time so overjoyed at the unexpected prospect of help that they kept on encouraging the fleet as it sailed in by cheers and *shouting*.

Verbal echoes and the Sicilian situation recall Thucydides’ famous description of the battle between the Athenian and Syracusan forces in the harbor at Syracuse in 413 BC (Thuc. 7.71):

Meanwhile the two armies on shore [*o ek tes ges pezos*], while victory hung in the balance, were a prey to the most *agonizing* and conflicting emotions; the natives thirsting for more glory than they had already won, while the invaders feared to find themselves in an even worse plight than before. The Athenians’ entire hope lay with their fleet, and their fear for the outcome was like nothing they had experienced . . . at last the Syracusans and their allies, after the battle had lasted a long while, put the Athenians to flight, and with much *shouting* and cheering chased them in open rout to the shore.

It is also difficult not to think of Thucydides when reading Polybius' account of the siege of Carthage by the consul Marcus Atilius Regulus in 255 BC (1.32–36). On that occasion, Xanthippus the Spartan comes to the rescue of the Carthaginians in very much the same way that in 414 BC Gylippus the Spartan had saved the Syracusans in book 7 of Thucydides. Polybius' scene is set in Africa, but it is still part of the struggle for Sicily, and the two situations are very similar. Regulus had just won victories that left the Carthaginian forces in disarray and the city in mortal danger; Xanthippus arrived to save them in the nick of time. So, too, in Thucydides Gylippus found the Syracusans on the point of giving up and their forces disorganized, but he brought them back from the brink of defeat.

The care with which Thucydides identifies the first year of the Peloponnesian War also seems to be echoed in Polybius' statement about the starting point of his introductory books (387/386 BC):

In the fifteenth year, when Chrysis was in her forty-eighth year as priestess at Argos, when Aenesias was Ephor at Sparta, two months before the end of the archonship of Pythodorus at Athens, six months after the battle at Potidaea, right at the beginning of spring. (Thuc. 2.2.1)

It was, therefore, the nineteenth year after the battle of Aegospotami and the sixteenth before that at Leuctra, the year in which the Spartans ratified what is known as the peace of Antalcidas, in which Dionysius the Elder, after defeating the Italiot Greeks in the battle at the river Elleporus, was besieging Rhegium, and in which the Gauls, after taking Rome itself by assault, occupied the whole of the city except the Capitol. (Pol. 1.6.1–2)

Herodotus and Thucydides, then, combine to affect, to some extent, Polybius' approach to writing history. Xenophon, a fourth-century BC historian, who famously started his *Hellenica* without introduction by continuing directly (more or less) where Thucydides left off, is not usually cited as an influence on Polybius, although the latter certainly knew his work (Pol. 3.6.10, 6.45.1). But he is the last historian before Polybius whose work survives at length and was thus a vital link in the historical tradition. Polybius' highly intrusive and analytical narrator certainly does not come from Xenophon, who is all but anonymous as a historical narrator and has very little to say about theory, but Xenophon's personal experience in the events of history—in particular as one of the generals who led the 10,000 Greek mercenaries in the hire of Cyrus out of the heart of Persia—must have recommended itself most warmly to Polybius. Here was a man, like himself, of extensive military and political experience, perfectly

qualified to write history. As the first historian to have written up at length his own role in affairs, in his famous work the *Anabasis*, it is hard to imagine that Xenophon did not provide some sort of model for Polybius to follow when writing himself into the story of Rome.

Perhaps there are more parallels than has generally been thought. For instance, Xenophon was a close personal friend of the great Spartan king Agesilaus, about whom he wrote an influential encomium, a biographically based work of praise. In chapters 3 to 8 of the *Agesilaus*, he describes the various traits of Agesilaus' character, some of which recall quite closely those of Scipio Aemilianus at 21.23–30 (discussed in [chapter 1](#)). Agesilaus had, for instance, high standards of financial probity (*Ages.* 4.1–6), as evidenced by, among other things, the way in which, when the Spartan state declared him heir to King Agis, he gave half of the inheritance to his mother's family, as they were in want. Scipio Aemilianus likewise gave an inheritance to his mother (*Pol.* 31.26). Courage, of course, characterizes them both (*Ages.* 6.1–3; Polybius 31.29). Sexual continence was one of Agesilaus' qualities (*Ages.* 5.1–7), as it was of Aemilianus' (*Pol.* 31.25); this might also remind us of Aemilianus' grandfather (by adoption), Scipio Africanus, who famously turned down the beautiful female captive at the siege of New Carthage in 209 BC (*Pol.* 10.19.3–7; see introduction). Interestingly, right at the end of the section on New Carthage, Polybius depicts a scene of Africanus training his army and preparing it for campaign, which ends with the following sentence (*Pol.* 10.20.6–7):

So with the infantry exercising and drilling on the ground outside the town, with the fleet at sea practising manoeuvres and rowing, and with the men in town sharpening weapons, forging brass or working as carpenters, in a word, with everyone busily engaged upon the preparation of weapons, no one who saw that town could have helped himself from saying, in the words of Xenophon, that it was “a workshop of war.”

The quotation at the end is from Xenophon's *Agesilaus* (1.26; much the same wording in *Hellenica* 3.4.16–17), the only one surviving from Xenophon in Polybius. But Polybius has not just picked out a memorable phrase: he reproduces the whole scene of Agesilaus training his army at Ephesus, which Xenophon summarizes as follows:

Indeed he made the whole city in which he was quartered a sight to see. For the market was full of arms and horses of all sorts on sale, and the coppersmiths, carpenters, workers in iron, cobblers, and painters were all busy making weapons of war, so that you might have thought that the city was really a war factory.

There can be no doubt that Polybius had Agesilaus in mind when describing Scipio Africanus at New Carthage, and I believe he was thinking of the same analogy when describing Scipio Aemilianus' character in book 31. It is possible that Polybius has unconsciously merged the two Scipios in his own mind, but I think it is very probable that he liked to depict himself in the same relation to Aemilianus as Xenophon was to Agesilaus.

The direct quotation from the *Agesilaus* leads us easily to that work's possible influence on Polybius, but Xenophon may have exerted influence on another part of Polybius' *Histories*. As we saw in [chapter 1](#), it is not completely clear why Polybius dealt in such detail with the war that Carthage was forced to wage against her mercenaries immediately after the First Punic War (1.65–88). I suggested that it was intended to demonstrate the dangers of relying on mercenaries so heavily and that Polybius' treatment of this theme was heavily influenced by Xenophon's *Anabasis*. In this I follow a recent argument (kindly communicated to me by Bruce Gibson) setting out the points of contact in the story between Polybius and Xenophon. Polybius had identified the march of the 10,000 as particularly revealing of the weakness of the Persian empire and, therefore, as one of the main causes of Alexander the Great's invasion of Persia (Pol. 3.6.12–13). So he obviously knew Xenophon's account well. In that account Xenophon employs the unusual word “strangers” (*xenoi*) to describe the mercenary army of Cyrus; Polybius does the same for Carthage's mercenaries (Pol. 1.65.3). Payment of the mercenaries lies very much at the heart of both accounts, as does the theme of disunity. We noted the centrality of stoning in Polybius' depiction of the Carthaginian mercenaries' barbarity (Pol. 1.69): as soon as they got obstreperous, they resorted to stoning to death anyone they disagreed with; indeed “stone him” (*balle*) was the only word they all understood. It is also a feature of the *Anabasis*. When the Greek generals were in discussion with the leaders of Cerasus, the men took exception to the process and the cry arose (*Anab.* 5.7.21), “strike them, strike them, stone them, stone them” (*paie, paie, balle, balle*). Dexippus angers the men and is stoned (*Anab.* 6.6.5–7). Clearchus is almost stoned to death for lying to the army about the purpose of the expedition (*Anab.* 1.3.2). One of the Arcadian generals suggests stoning Xenophon himself for his treatment of the soldiers (*Anab.* 7.6.10). In both works, then, stoning is one of the characteristics of out-of-control mercenary soldiers.

That Xenophon should have been a role model for Polybius as a soldier-politician turned historian is not in the least surprising, nor that his *Anabasis* influenced Polybius' *Histories* in ways not previously identified.

The works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and no doubt other

distant (but now lost) predecessors form part of Polybius' intellectual make-up, seamlessly absorbed into his historical vision and methodology, passages perhaps remembered or half-remembered or even subconsciously slipping into his own composition; but they do not account for the Polybius we have in front of us. More important is his relationship with written texts that he used to write his own work. We will meet some of these historians when we look at Polybius' statements about them, but we should briefly note the context out of which his more obvious characteristics emerge.

First, length. Polybius' history is about five times longer than that of Thucydides, itself a substantial work. This is a trend that develops in the fourth century BC. Although very little of the work produced at that time survives, we do hear about the great length at which various authors wrote. Theopompus' study of Philip II of Macedon (called *Philippika*), for instance, contained fifty-eight major divisions, which we call books (papyrus rolls in antiquity were often of a standard length, which tended to have the effect of regularizing book lengths). Ephorus' history, covering the years from the return of the Heraclids (supposedly 1069/1068) to 340 BC, needed thirty books. Timaeus, Polybius' predecessor, wrote thirty-eight books of Sicilian history from mythical times down to 289/288 BC, adding a separate account of Rome's war with Pyrrhus ending in 264, when Polybius starts (1.5.1). To some extent this scale must be a reflection of the way the world was growing larger. Out of the relatively small Greek world characterized by (theoretically) sovereign, independent city-states, first Philip created a unity (of sorts) in Greece itself, and then Alexander conquered the whole east. By the time Polybius was born at the end of the third century BC, the shadow of Rome was already on the west and was moving eastward. This was a new and much enlarged world that was continuing to grow—small wonder that history had to get bigger to deal with it.

Second, universal history. Polybius claims that none of his contemporaries wrote this sort of history (1.4.2), Ephorus being his only real predecessor (5.33.2). Clearly he regards himself as following in Ephorus' footsteps, at least with respect to geographical universality. Ephorus seems to have devoted a book to each geographical area, but it was also the huge time period he covered that reflected the universality of his work. To this extent Polybius, with his very narrow chronological coverage, is less ambitious than Ephorus. In the way, however, that he ties universality to the single theme of Rome's domination of the Mediterranean, he surely also surpasses Ephorus.

Third, polemic. Coming straight from the gentlemanly Xenophon, who had not a bad word (indeed, scarcely any word) to say about his

fellow historians, it might appear strange to us to encounter one who devotes a whole book to an assault on Timaeus and frequently stops elsewhere to launch a broadside against one or other historian who has got it all wrong. In fact, criticism of predecessors had been there from the very beginning of history writing, functioning as an important form of self-definition. Herodotus criticizes his predecessors, Thucydides criticizes Herodotus (although without naming him), and we know that the practice continued and developed in the fourth century. Timaeus seems to have set new standards of abuse, laying about him with abandon in all directions, attacking Plato, Aristotle, and even Homer, in addition to a host of historians. So, as Polybius emphasizes, Timaeus had it coming and thoroughly deserved everything he got. Polybius' contemporary, Polemon, wrote a now lost work titled *Against Timaeus* in at least twelve books, making Polybius look quite restrained in his criticism. Polemon's attack, however, was entirely devoted to polemic, and it may have been unusual for Polybius to include a whole book of criticism in a work of history.

There are other developments between Xenophon and Polybius that contribute to the character of the latter's writing—an increasing interest in morality and judging character; more rhetorically elaborate style; a greater focus on individuals, especially kings, boosted no doubt by the fascination of writers and readers with the figure of Alexander the Great. But it is time we turned to Polybius himself.

Basics: Usefulness, Audience, Scope, Truth, and Subject Matter

Scholars tend to focus on theoretical passages, wherever they occur in the work, and extract from them Polybius' theories about different aspects of history writing. It might be more revealing of his priorities to begin by tracking his historiographical comments in the order in which he makes them, at least down to the "big statement" of book 12. It is interesting, in itself, that he does not make this big statement right at the beginning of the work. He has important things to say when he starts, but clearly he feels that you do not need an extended explanation of all his theories about history to understand what he is doing: theoretical analysis will follow where it is called for, but in the meantime the reader can get on with reading the work, just as Polybius can get on with writing it.

The very first thing alluded to is the usefulness of history, knowledge of the past being the best corrective of behavior (1.1–2).

The practical usefulness of history—the lessons that are to be drawn from particular incidents and general trends, and from the behavior of individuals—is alluded to time and again throughout the work. All historians, Polybius says, emphasize that “the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of history, and that the most vivid, indeed only, teacher of how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune is the recollection of other people’s calamities.” His work will make clear the many and substantial advantages accruing to the student from “the mode of pragmatic history” (1.2.8). This is the first occasion on which Polybius uses the phrase “pragmatic history” (*pragmatike historia*). Curiously, he does not really define it and what it involves until the beginning of book 9 (9.1–2) and then further in book 12 (12.25e). He means history that deals with *praxeis*, “deeds,” in the sense of political and military events. Presumably, his audience must have understood, broadly speaking, what he was referring to. He does accuse Hannibalic historians of introducing gods and sons of gods into “pragmatic history” (3.47.8), and he says that the mediocre Postumius Albinus attempted to write a “pragmatic history” (39.1.4). In both instances it could be Polybius, rather than the authors themselves, identifying their works as “pragmatic,” but given his unexplained use of the term at the beginning of his work, it must have had some currency in his day; it seems highly improbable that he invented it.

Reference to the usefulness of history does raise the matter of Polybius’ audience. Who will find this work useful? At whom is he aiming it? If history is the best training for the warrior-politician, a point he emphasizes repeatedly, obviously the target audience must be primarily the rich and powerful who aspire to leadership roles. Polybius also states explicitly that the first two introductory books are necessary only because the Greeks do not know the earlier history of Rome and Carthage (1.3.7–8). So the elite classes among the Greeks seem to be the main audience that he has in mind. He is also well aware that Romans especially will read the work, as it contains an account of their most glorious exploits (31.22.8–11). This will function, he says, as a guarantee of its accuracy: because the Romans know their own story and could not possibly accept any departure from the truth, no author could afford to expose himself to their contemptuous disbelief. Polybius lived among and wrote for privileged, powerful people like himself, both Greek and Roman, but his opening statement about the usefulness of history could also apply to a more general audience of educated people. By calling attention to the calamities that other people have suffered, history teaches us all how to deal better with our own lives.

Polybius then moves on to the most important point of his

introduction, the universality of history as he interprets it (1.3–4). As we saw in [chapter 1](#), he decided to start the work proper in the 140th Olympiad (220/219–217/216 BC) because it was only then that history, previously a series of scattered stories, became an organic whole. A historian should reflect the way that Fortune directed the affairs of the world in one direction (Roman domination) by writing a history that dealt with everything—that was, in other words, “universal” (by which he meant only the Mediterranean world). None of his contemporaries had attempted this: they only wrote monographs of limited scope. He later admits that his fourth-century BC predecessor Ephorus had written a universal history (5.33.2); of course, on his own reasoning, it could only be an inferior effort, as history was not yet an organic whole. The unique situation in world history brought about by Fortune called for a unique work of universal history. Here Polybius produces a memorable analysis of the shortcomings of small-scale history writing: anyone who thinks that they can understand the whole of history by reading monographs on individual subjects is like the person who thinks he can appreciate the beauty and grace of a live animal from looking at the different parts of its dissected corpse (1.4.7–8). He continues:

Partial histories therefore contribute very little to the reliable knowledge of the whole. It is only by the interweaving and comparison of all the parts with each other that noting their resemblances and differences, we reach a stage where we are able to make a general review and thus derive both benefit and pleasure from history.

So history can give pleasure as well as practical instruction, a theme taken up at various later stages of the work. Polybius’ opening statement, then, his claim for special recognition, is that he wrote a universal and political history, and it was unique in understanding and depicting how Fortune had brought together into one coherent story the history of the Mediterranean lands. This uniqueness makes it uniquely useful. Although at this early stage he does not name any competitors, he immediately flags his aggressive attitude toward other historians.

Polybius then gets down to business with his introductory account of Roman history in the years after 387 BC. The First Punic War will, he says, detain him for rather longer than most of the introductory material, for three main reasons (1.14–15). The first was the claim (by this time somewhat mundane) that it was the longest, best-prepared, most action-packed war there had ever been. Second, and more interesting, he maintains that both states were still morally upright in this period, making it easier to assess their character than in the

Hannibalic War. Third, and most important for present purposes, he says that the two writers regarded as the best historians of the war, Philinus of Acragas (whose pro-Carthaginian account does not survive) and Quintus Fabius Pictor (Rome's first historian, whose account, written in Greek, is also lost), have not adequately presented the truth. They have not deliberately lied, but they are like people in love: they can see no fault in their own side, Philinus supporting the Carthaginians, Fabius the Romans. Patriotism and friendship are human virtues, not historical ones. A historian can have none of this and may well be called on to praise his enemies and reproach his friends when the truth demands it: "for just as a living creature which has lost its sight is wholly incapacitated, so if history is stripped of the truth all that is left is but an idle tale" (1.14.6). Without truth, history is useless, and there is no better way of emphasizing truth than by showing up the shortcomings of other historians. On this occasion Polybius gives just one rather minor example of Philinus' inadequacy: he attributed a victory to the Carthaginians over the Romans at the beginning of the war that was in fact a defeat; there was no way of reconciling his account, it was simply not the truth (1.15).

The next situation that elicits comments about history is the dramatic reversal of fortune suffered by the consul of 256/255 BC, M. Atilius Regulus, who was ruthlessly intractable when victorious over the Carthaginian forces in Africa, but very soon afterward found himself defeated, captured, and forced to beg for mercy (1.35). Anyone who analyzes this correctly, Polybius says, will find a useful moral lesson for a better life: it is again the usefulness of history that is emphasized. There are two ways for men to improve: learning from one's own mistakes and learning from the mistakes of others. The second way is much better, for obvious reasons, and that is why the experience that you gain from political (*pragmatike*) history is the best discipline for real life: it provides the opportunity to learn what is best at no cost to yourself.

We might note that Polybius returns to the subject of reversals of fortune later in the work (15.34–36). We have already seen (in [chapter 1](#)) his coverage of the worthless Egyptian courtier Agathokles, who gained huge power through the incapacity of Ptolemy IV Philopator, but lost it and his life through his own cowardice and indolence. Sensational reversals (*ekplektikai peripeteiai*) like this catch our attention briefly when we first encounter them. It is interesting to see happening what appeared impossible, but it is also unnatural and not what public opinion likes—no one seeks to emulate irrational reversals. So undue emphasis on such sensational events, being neither beneficial nor pleasurable, is not suitable for history. Curiously, Polybius argues that such emphasis is suitable for tragedy, as if to say

that tragedy is concerned with the unpleasant and the unprofitable. It is difficult to imagine that he means this quite as he has stated it: as we will see later in this chapter, he maintains that tragedy aims to thrill and charm its audience. I suspect that what he means is that sensational reversals are suitable to tragedy, as indeed they are, but he is caught up in his own argumentation about history, which does not transfer very satisfactorily to tragedy.

The reader first encounters an emphasis on geography in connection with the First Punic War (1.41–42): Polybius feels that he has to describe the geography of Sicily, so that those who do not know it will not be confused. It is a matter of making everything absolutely clear. Similarly, when he comes to Rome's Italian wars, an account of the geography of Italy—and more precisely of northern Italy—is necessary to clarify the events of the wars (2.14–16). This is geography solely in the service of historical narrative. As we will see, Polybius also has larger scale geographical concerns more to do with theoretical notions than with practical politics and war.

Although they may receive more detailed treatment, or analysis from different angles, at later stages in the work, some of the most important of Polybius' thoughts on history thus emerge very quickly: the usefulness of history, the importance of writing universal history rather than limited monographs, pragmatic history, an aggressive engagement with predecessors and contemporaries, the centrality of truth.

Sensationalism and Drama in History Writing

There is another clear statement about the universality of Polybius' own work in contrast to the narrow topics of his predecessors (2.37.4–5), before we are introduced to a new subject that arises in connection with the war of Cleomenes. In book 1, Polybius had assessed Philinus and Fabius Pictor as sources for the First Punic War. Now, in analyzing the sources for the Cleomenean War, he compares the (lost) works of Aratus (the great Achaean leader in the second half of the third century BC) and Phylarchus (whose histories covered the period 272–219 BC). This leads into an extended attack on the latter, out of which some important observations about the nature of history emerge (2.56–63).

The main issue is Phylarchus' tragic and dramatic presentation of events (2.56.6–13):

Wishing, for instance, to emphasize the cruelty of Antigonos and the Macedonians and with them that of Aratus and the Achaeans,

he tells us that the Mantineans, when they fell into the hands of their enemies, were subjected to great misfortunes, and that the calamities that befell the city, the most ancient and greatest in Arcadia, were so dreadful that they horrified all the Greeks and moved them to tears. In his eagerness to arouse the pity of his readers and to make them sympathetic to his arguments, he introduces scenes of women clinging to each other, tearing their hair and baring their breasts, and in addition he describes the tears and lamentations of men and women accompanied by their aged parents as they are led away into captivity. Phylarchus does this throughout his history, striving on every occasion to place the horrors before our eyes.

The question is over the extent to which this is either proper or useful to history. It is Polybius' view that a historian should not try to startle his readers with sensationalism, nor, like a tragic dramatist, make up speeches for his characters, nor list all the possible consequences of the events under consideration, whether or not they actually happened. The historian's first duty is to record truthfully what actually happened and what was said, however mundane that might be.

For the aim of tragedy is by no means the same as that of history, but rather the opposite. The tragic poet seeks to thrill and charm his audience for the moment by the most persuasive words possible, but the historian's task is to instruct and persuade serious students for all time by means of the truth of the words and actions he presents, since in the case of tragedy the supreme aim is probability, even if what is said is untrue, the purpose being to beguile the spectators, but in the case of history it is truth, the purpose being to benefit those who love learning.

Furthermore, Phylarchus limits himself to narrating reversals uncritically without analyzing the cause or purpose of the actions, thus making it impossible for the reader to know where to direct his anger or pity.

We should note in passing Polybius' simple statement here about an issue that later proves to be somewhat more complicated (and to which he devotes closer attention): the recording of speeches. Dramatists (and Phylarchus) make them up, but real historians may not do so: they must record what was actually said. For the moment Polybius leaves the matter aside, as his main concern at this point is drama and sensationalism in history. The usual conclusion drawn from the important passage just cited is that Polybius was fundamentally opposed to emotionally charged, dramatic history writing. This is

undoubtedly true of his attitude to works that he thinks are *entirely* of this nature (like that of Phylarchus), but unless we accuse him of inconsistency and insincerity, it cannot be the whole story, for he himself writes scenes of high drama and emotion. At the fall of Carthage, for instance, in 146 BC, the Carthaginian commander Hasdrubal threw himself at the mercy of Scipio (38.20). His wife then appeared, dressed like a great lady, holding her children by the hand, and made a speech berating her husband for abandoning Carthage, before killing her children and herself. All who saw it were moved to sympathy (unfortunately the passage, especially the end, is badly damaged in the only surviving manuscript). Battles are sometimes described in highly dramatized form. When the Seleucid royal troops under the command of Xenoetas, for instance, drunk and careless after capturing the enemy camp, are surprised by the return of the pretender, Molon, they panic and throw themselves and their pack animals into the river, forgetting its force and drowning. "Thus the impression presented by the river," Polybius writes, "was indeed melodramatic and extraordinary, with horses, mules, arms and corpses, and every kind of baggage being swept down by the current together with the swimmers" (5.48.9). In a similarly dramatic way, the whole end of Philip V's career is presented almost as Greek tragedy (23.10–11):

It was then that Fortune, as if she wanted to take the opportunity to punish him for all the wicked and criminal acts he had committed throughout his life, sent against him a host of furies, tormentors and avenging spirits of his victims. These never left him by day or night, but tortured him so terribly right up till his death that all men acknowledged the truth of the proverb "Justice has an eye," and that we mortals should never scorn her.

This sort of thing, however, is not common, and tends to occur at moments of great importance, when it is quite proper to be affected by the drama of the occasion. No reader could fail to be moved, Polybius says, by an account of the final battle of the Hannibalic war (15.9.3). In other words, an emotional account, and an emotional response from the reader, can be appropriate in the right circumstances. One of Polybius' problems with Phylarchus is that the latter writes this way the whole time; and by failing to assess causes, he fails to identify appropriate circumstances. In the case of Mantinea, for example, Polybius goes on to argue at some length that the Mantineans behaved appallingly (they abandoned the Achaean League and massacred the Achaean garrison they had asked for) and thoroughly deserved a worse fate than the one they met (their property was merely pillaged, and their free citizens enslaved). Not only is the sympathy for the

Mantineans aroused by Phylarchus' account completely inappropriate, it could only be achieved in the first place by inventing a tissue of lies, and improbable ones at that. Ultimately what seems to be at stake is truth, but perhaps not solely in the way we think of it. A powerful but controversial argument has been made in recent decades that for historians in the ancient world, the opposite of truth is not falsehood (although they often call it that), but prejudice. It is interesting that in the present case Polybius does not actually itemize the lies, and there would be grounds for thinking that the real problem is Phylarchus' pro-Mantinean, anti-Achaean prejudice, which has led him into the "lie" of inappropriately sensationalizing the Mantineans' cause. Polybius' "true" analysis of the situation—that the Mantineans were a treacherous lot and got what they deserved—looks very much as if it is the equally partisan Achaean version.

The same applies to the next accusation against Phylarchus, that he sensationalized the execution of Aristomachus of Argos, with stories of how he screamed under torture, no man less deserving of such a terrible fate (2.59–60). In fact, he was a traitor and a tyrant and had betrayed the Achaeans; although he deserved to be led around the Peloponnese and tortured as a deterrent spectacle, he suffered nothing more terrible than being drowned by the officers in charge. To the modern mind such a relatively trivial disagreement scarcely seems to warrant the detailed rebuttal we get; but it is important to recognize that what we are dealing with here is not rational, argument-based criticism but polemic, an important subject to which I will return.

A further misconception is identified by Polybius (2.61): Phylarchus seems to think it is the historian's duty to emphasize criminal acts. On the contrary, Polybius contends, it is the special virtue of history to praise honorable conduct; while exaggerating the calamities of Mantinea, Phylarchus omits to say anything about the glorious faithfulness to their allies of Megalopolis (Polybius' home town). Polybius does not parade the praise of honorable conduct as a special characteristic of history elsewhere in the work, and his criticism of Phylarchus on this matter looks more like simple annoyance at failure to praise Megalopolis than the enunciation of historical theory.

Just as at the start of his discussion of Phylarchus, speeches were recognized as an issue for historians, but one not discussed in detail, so at the end we find a passing reference to another point that Polybius later builds up into a matter of great importance. Phylarchus' ludicrous overestimate of the amount of booty, 6,000 talents, taken by the Spartans when they captured Megalopolis (2.62–63), is evidence of his astonishing lack of practical experience and ignorance of the economic state of Greece, so essential for the historian. On this occasion Polybius chooses to deal just with the economic issue, but as

we will see, one of his most insistent claims is that it is impossible to be a historian without being an experienced soldier-politician. Phylarchus' estimate of 6,000 talents is not just evidence of his ignorance; he also fails to take it into account in his narrative. For when Ptolemy withdraws his financial backing for Cleomenes, Phylarchus says the latter is worried about being able to pay his troops. Yet he is supposed to have just got the enormous sum of 6,000 talents from Megalopolis, more than enough to pay the army. This does look like a genuine inconsistency; by modern standards, at last, a real score against Phylarchus.

Plan of the Work Changed

There are interesting statements about history in book 3. We learn, for instance, of Polybius' change of plan for the whole work: instead of finishing with the defeat of Macedon in 167 BC, he is going to continue down to 146, so that he can trace the subsequent policy of Rome, the nature of her rule, the opinions about it entertained by her subjects, and the prevailing currents and tendencies in public and private life (3.4–5). That way, contemporaries will be able to see whether Roman rule is to be embraced or avoided, and future generations can decide whether it is admirable and to be emulated or blameworthy. This, he claims, is where the usefulness of his work will lie. Nobody goes to war just to beat the enemy, sails on the ocean just to cross it, or acquires knowledge just for its own sake: all actions are aimed at pleasure, the good, or utility. So the final purpose of his work will be to explain conditions throughout the Roman empire up to 146 BC. This is a more general expression of the utility of history than we have had, but it still allows for its specific usefulness to politicians, present and future. To a certain extent there is an element of self-serving argument here. It is clear that Polybius *wants* to cover the period after 167 BC, perhaps because he was so closely involved in affairs, and he finds reasons to do so. There was nothing wrong with the original plan to explain Rome's rise to world power, and the present adjustment is a sensible addition to that plan, rather than something altogether different.

The Causes of Wars

Having mapped out his new plan for the work, Polybius is immediately drawn into another theoretical discussion, this time on

the causes of war, an analysis for which he is well known (3.6–7). What caused the war against Hannibal? Others have got this all wrong, he claims, because they do not distinguish properly between causes, pretexts, and beginnings:

I maintain that the beginnings of anything are the first attempts to put into action decisions already taken, but that the causes are what lead up to the decisions and judgements; I refer here to ideas and states of mind and the calculations to do with these things through which we come to take decisions and to form projects.

The causes (*aitiai*) of Alexander the Great's war against Persia were the march of the 10,000 under Xenophon and Agesilaus' campaigns in the east: both of these factors led Philip to believe that the Persians would be no match for the Macedonian forces and that, therefore, a campaign against Persia should be launched; the pretext for war (*prophasis*) was vengeance for the Persian invasions of Greece in the fifth century BC; and the beginning (*arche*) was Alexander's crossing to Asia. The technical vocabulary seems to have been taken over from Thucydides, but reassigned. Thucydides famously saw the truest explanation (*alethestate prophasis*) for the Peloponnesian War as Spartan fear of Athens' growing power (1.26.3); and the grievances (*aitiai*), the *casus belli*, were the incidents that occurred at Corcyra and Potidaea; he does not identify a beginning. Has Polybius made any advance on this?

The tripartite division is a little more systematic, but perhaps it is also more mechanical. Thucydides' grievances seem to have an organic connection with the causes: they are, so to speak, "real" grievances, a natural manifestation of the underlying causes. In Polybius the pretext can be quite artificial. The fundamental cause of Antiochus III's war with Rome in 192–189 BC was the anger of the Aetolians, who thought they had been repeatedly maltreated by the Romans and so invited Antiochus over to help (3.7.2–3). The pretext, the liberation of the Greeks, had no natural connection with this; it was just something they made up, "in defiance of logic and truth." In addition, the explanation does not take Antiochus' motivation into account at all, nor the actions of the Romans. In other words, it is not a general analysis of why the war happened, but really just explains why the Aetolians did what they did—a one-sidedness that has often been noted in Polybius' scheme. Nor does the system seem capable of assigning responsibility. For instance, after a long investigation of the causes and beginning of the Second Punic War (3.6–33), Polybius still cannot say whose fault it was. He had taken great care to identify the causes of the war—primarily the Roman treatment of Carthage after

the Mercenary War, but also the anger of the Barcid family and the success of Carthage in Spain. Finally he says that if you take the destruction of Saguntum by Hannibal as the cause of the war (not one of his listed causes), then Carthage is responsible; if you take the Roman seizure of Sardinia, then Carthage had excellent reason to fight the war. In both instances, the focus is on the Carthaginian action, as it is undoubtedly Hannibal's campaigns in Spain, culminating in the siege of Saguntum, that provide the "beginning" of the war (3.7.13ff.). There is, however, at least some confusion between cause and beginning: which was Saguntum, a cause or a beginning? It seems to be both. Furthermore, Polybius almost seems to have forgotten the matter of "pretext." He does mention in passing that Hannibal gave a false pretext for attacking Saguntum—the Roman execution of some of its leading citizens—and would have done much better to stick to the truth and demand the restoration of Sardinia (3.15.9). And his lengthy discussion of the treaties between Rome and Carthage does seem to imply that they were used to make claims about who started the war.

It should be noted also that Polybius does not apply his system explicitly to all wars. He analyzes with some care the situation leading to the First Punic War (1.7–12), and there is plenty of relevant material for assessing cause, pretext, and beginning, but he does not do so explicitly. He identifies the beginning of Carthage's Mercenary War (1.70.7) and certainly thinks he has explained the circumstances in which it came about, but he does not formally identify the causes, and it is not at all clear what he thinks they were. The mercenaries were certainly the main cause, although the Carthaginians had aggravated them initially by refusing to pay their inflated wage demands, but Polybius does not really explain why the mercenaries behaved as they did, beyond presenting them as a band of thugs increasingly out of control. There do not seem to be any separate pretexts or grievances involved. Lack of precision here may be due to the fact that in this case we are, of course, still in an introductory book, where it would be wrong to expect full discussion of causation. That sort of detail, we may surmise, was reserved for the meat of the work.

Polybius draws his theoretical discussion on causes to a conclusion with a more general emphasis on the importance of explaining why things in general (not just wars) happen. A doctor is of no use if he does not know why illnesses occur; a politician is of no use if he cannot work out the how, the why, and the origins of an event (3.7.4–7). This is a very substantial point, repeatedly emphasized. The explanatory mode, rather than the purely descriptive, is central to the activity of the historian. Polybius' return to the actual causes of the Second Punic War brings him into conflict with Fabius Pictor again,

who maintained that the ambition and lust for power of the Carthaginian leader Hasdrubal constituted one of the causes of the war (3.8–9). Polybius provides a good argument to rebut this view. He brings it up in the first place, however, not because it was inherently unreasonable, but because he wants to say something about Fabius' status. He is afraid that readers will find Fabius' views only too plausible, as he was a contemporary and a Roman senator. This is difficult terrain for Polybius, in which he comes close to inconsistency or double standards. He is saying you cannot believe Fabius just because he was a contemporary politician; yet it is precisely practical military and political experience that he will be presenting as the most important prerequisite for a historian, frequently parading his own political experience as a reason for readers to trust his judgment. His circumspect language here perhaps betrays his awareness that he is on thin ice: he allows Fabius a degree of authority, but says that in most cases you have to check what he says against the facts.

In the same connection, if I may look forward to a later book, Polybius offers an interesting critique of two late third/early second-century BC Rhodian historians, Zeno and Antisthenes (16.14–20). He admits they were both active politicians, and there is a note of respect in his criticisms. Antisthenes seems to fade from Polybius' attention, but the charges are writing monographs, excessive patriotism, ignorance of Peloponnesian topography, and too much attention to style, not enough to research. Polybius' difficulty with Zeno is almost certainly the same as with Fabius—a risk of credibility that might lead his readers to believe Zeno rather than himself. Rhodians had a reputation for naval expertise, and the first example that Polybius raises is the naval battle of Lade in 201 BC, in which they were involved. The rival source must be discredited, and there is a great deal of somewhat obscure and unimpressive criticism. In particular, his demonstrations of Zeno's topographical inadequacies are themselves singularly inadequate, but he ends by telling us of the letter he wrote to Zeno pointing out his mistakes about the geography of Laconia. Zeno responded courteously, he reports, and Polybius' superior authority as a historian is established.

As he progresses toward book 12, Polybius continues to make further comment on historiographical issues already raised. There is a brief swipe at two other historians of the Second Punic War, Chaereas and Sosylus—their work was on a par with “the common gossip of the barber's shop” (3.20.5)—and another example of Philinus' lack of reliability (3.26). Earlier writers on Hannibal's crossing of the Alps are criticized for their sensationalism (3.47–48): their coverage is both fabricated and inconsistent. So, too, those historians who have written about the death of Hieronymus of Syracuse

have done so at great length with many marvellous tales, telling of the prodigies that occurred before his reign and the misfortunes of the Syracusans, and describing tragically the cruelty of his character and the impiety of his actions, and finally the strange and terrible nature of the circumstances attending his death. (7.7.1–2)

On this occasion, Polybius adds a new element by linking this sort of sensational writing with authors who write monographs: they are forced through lack of material to exaggerate the importance of minor events and write about things that do not really deserve attention. He had already accused them of not engaging with what is central, “the how the why and the wherefore” being much more important than mere narrative: “for I still maintain that the most essential part of history is the consequences of events, their concomitant circumstances and above all their causes” (3.32.6, also 11.19a). This is something that writers of monographs fail to explain: you simply cannot understand the interconnectedness of world history from individual studies (e.g., 3.32, 5.33, 8.2). Theopompus’ decision to abandon general Greek history in favor of a concentration on Philip II of Macedon is severely criticized, as are his monstrous accusations that Philip and his courtiers were drink-and sex-addicted brutes (8.9–11). All this criticism is, of course, integrally related to the practical usefulness of history’s lessons.

Geography

Geography continues to concern Polybius. Because of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the Romans, he argues, we now know a great deal more about the world than we used to, and should not criticize writers of old for what they could not know (3.58–59). They do, however, need correcting—“no part of history requires more rational treatment and more correction by the light of truth”—and primarily for this purpose, he undertook journeys in Africa, Spain, Gaul, and the Atlantic. The passing reference to geography being a part of history is in fact the first explicit statement to that effect, although by implication Polybius has already made it clear that you have to know your geography to understand history. Most of his geographical statements are closely linked to the political and military narrative, to explain, for example, a march, a siege, or a campaign; these practical needs are well explained when he pauses to describe Sparta (5.21.3–10).

At times, however, Polybius’ treatment also becomes wider and

more distant from the practical needs of the narrative. He starts out, for example, to explain Hannibal's route from Spain to Italy (3.36–37). This should make good sense if we want to understand the details of the story. In fact, the discussion is highly theoretical and of no discernible assistance in understanding Hannibal's march. Polybius says there is no point in giving place-names in regions people do not know anyway, so he devises a methodology, based on the compass points and the part of the Earth lying under each. The world is divided into three parts. As you enter the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar, Europe is on your left on the north shore, Africa is on your right on the south shore, and Asia, bounded by the Don and the Nile, is straight ahead, between the northeast and the south. In a very general way, this could be seen as useful for future reference (if of no obvious help in following Hannibal across the Alps), but why do we need to know, for example, all about the flow of water out of, and the eventual silting up of the Black Sea (4.39–42)? Polybius says that he is writing in response to a debate about the Black Sea and particularly wishes to counter "the falsehoods and sensational tales of seafarers." But the question still stands: what is the connection between the hydrography of the Black Sea and political history? The same question arises in connection with Polybius' mathematical geography. Sicily was triangular (1.42.3), Italy and the north Italian plain too (2.14.4), and triangulation comes into his larger picture of the structure of the world (34.6.4). Why do we need to know this? It provides the reader with some schematic assistance for visualizing the world, but it is a long way from helping with the narrative.

In his important book on Polybius, Paul Pédech has argued that this sort of theoretical interest represented a development in Polybius from the soldier-politician who needed to understand local topographies, routes, distances, and so on, into a research scholar: the experiences of his life intellectualized his geographical perceptions. This is an attractive interpretation, but there may be more. A recent work by Katherine Clarke suggests a parallelism in Polybius' mind between history and geography in terms of process, causation, and explanation. Just like a war, the flow of water from the Black Sea has "true causes" (*aletheis aitiai*; 4.39.11) and will have consequences. Just as wars flow from each other, so do seas (the Sea of Azov into the Black Sea, the Propontis, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic). This theoretical, large-scale geography is thus perhaps, at least partly, a physical reflection of universal history. Our understanding of Polybius' geography would undoubtedly be greater if we had book 34, which was entirely devoted to the subject, but it does not survive, except in the discussions of later writers. He claims (3.57.5) that he is saving up geographical material for this later systematic treatment, to avoid both repeated

interruption of his narrative and a scattered presentation of geographical information. Even from what we have seen, however, it is clear that he did not do this with organized determination, and there are many important geographical descriptions and statements about geography outside of book 34.

There is one further new point about history before book 12. At the beginning of book 9 (9.1–2) Polybius indicates his awareness that his work is somewhat “austere” in its concentration on politics. Most other writers, he says, include the other branches of history, genealogies, and “colonies, foundations of cities and ties of kindred”; he is just going to stick to “peoples, cities and rulers.” So many authors have written about the other types that there is nothing new to say. Polybius has decided on the pragmatic mode of history because there is always something new in it and because it is so useful that students of history will always have the means to deal with any emergency that arises. On this occasion he emphasizes that his primary aim is not to provide pleasure, but to be of use to his readers.

Book 12

Book 12 is preserved only in fragments: at a generous estimate, about half of it survives. It has very important and interesting material, but the truth is we do not fully understand how it works. When you move into the fragmentary books of Polybius, you move into a world of uncertainty. A few instances of Polybius’ characteristically clear signposting that I talked about in [chapter 1](#) are included, but not enough to make it obvious exactly what he thought he was doing. Sadly, for instance, the beginning is missing. Presumably this would have explained much of what we need to know. Furthermore, although at 2.16.15 he says he will deal with myths concerning the River Po at a suitable point, especially because Timaeus is so ignorant on the subject—it looks as if he is thinking ahead to book 12—there are no other surviving forward references in the earlier books, nor indeed backward references in the later ones, to help us understand the place of book 12 in the overall plan of the history. In the absence of Polybius’ clear guidance, scholars have disagreed about its structure and intention. The arguments need not detain us. I believe its primary purpose is polemic, a sustained attack on Timaeus, a predecessor and (annoyingly) a competitor, at least to the extent that he wrote at length about Roman history, even if it was history of the period before Polybius’ own starting point. Polybius wants to reserve for himself the position of prime interpreter of Rome and must discredit utterly someone whose work, he admits, carries conviction for many readers

(12.25c, 12.26d). In the course of this demolition job, theoretical issues of central importance to the writing of history are raised and employed in the task; and it is to these we now turn.

Personal Experience Required by the Historian

The first chapters concern mistakes Timaeus made about Africa, Corsica, Sardinia, and Italy. He was, for instance, “childish and entirely deficient in judgement” in saying that the whole of Africa is sandy, dry, and barren (12.3.2); “after careless and perfunctory enquiries” (12.4.4), he gets the fauna of Corsica all wrong. The problem is his failure to undertake personal inquiry, which is “the most important part of history” (12. 4c.3–5):

For since many events occur at the same time in different places, and one man cannot be in several places at the same time, nor is it possible for a single man to have seen with his own eyes every place in the world and all the peculiar features of different places, the only thing left for the historian is to make enquiries from as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.

This is the first time we see emphasized the importance of personal research in the field. It is picked up later in the book in more detail (12.26e–28). We learn, Polybius says, by using our eyes and our ears (books in the ancient world were read aloud; by ears he means reading books, by eyes he means autopsy, seeing places for yourself): of these two it was far more important to conduct personal inquiry than it was to read books. He is a little inconsistent on the matter of hearing, because interviewing witnesses, which as we have just seen was crucial, is also a function of hearing, but the important thing is that Timaeus limited himself to reading books. This can be done, Polybius notes rather dismissively, without expense or danger; all you need is a decent library. Research in the field, on the other hand, is hard work and expensive, but “is the most important part of history” (12.27.6). The argument then develops by returning to a matter Polybius has already raised, the importance not just of personal inquiry, but of personal experience too. He cites Ephorus and Theopompos in support. The latter said that the man with the best knowledge of war is the one who has been present at most battles, the best speaker is the one who has taken part in most debates, and the same holds true for the best doctors and sailors. Odysseus is the perfect man of experience, just what history needs. To write history

you either must be an experienced politician or at least admit that practical training is necessary. Even in the questioning of witnesses, this experience is vital: without it, you do not know how to ask the right questions or correctly interpret the answers. Indeed, an inexperienced person, even when he is present at events, is not really there at all.

Timaeus had absolutely no practical experience of war, politics, or travel: he spent the best part of fifty years in Athenian libraries (12.25d.1) and apparently admitted as much himself (12.25h.1). This lack is the fundamental cause of all his shortcomings (12.26e). In pursuing the issue, Polybius draws a famous analogy between medicine and history (12.25d–e). Just as medicine has three parts (the theory of disease, dietetics, surgery/pharmacology) so too has pragmatic history: the study and collation of written sources; personal fieldwork to survey “cities, places, rivers, harbours, and generally the peculiar features of land and sea and the distances between them”; and last, political experience. Polybius claims that Timaeus, like the medical theoreticians, has mastered only the first and resembles someone who thinks that having seen great paintings he is therefore a capable painter. The sort of result you get in history is illustrated by Ephorus (12.25f). He was quite good at sea battles, but hopeless at land warfare: it is clear, for instance, that he did not understand what happened at the battle of Mantinea (in 362 BC), as will be evident if you check the terrain yourself (Polybius implying, of course, that he has done just that). Thus, “it is not possible for a man with no experience of military operations to write well about what happens in war, nor for one inexperienced in political life to write about these kinds of events and circumstances” (12.25g.1). Similarly with cities and other places, those who lack the requisite practical experience will necessarily leave out important things and make far too much of trivial things. This is exactly what happens with Timaeus.

Speeches

Another part of the problem facing the historian with no experience is that he cannot write with the vividness (*emphasis*) that carries conviction. It is like a painter who paints from stuffed dummies rather than from life: the vividness and animation (*enargeia*) of real figures are missing, and without them the historian cannot engage the interest or ultimately the confidence of his readers. So the least important of the three parts of history is the study of written sources. Polybius goes on to demonstrate the truth of his arguments by highlighting Timaeus’ practice in writing speeches, a much discussed passage (12.25i.3–

Speeches in the works of ancient historians have been problematic ever since Thucydides first highlighted the issues involved (1.22). He admitted it was difficult to remember exactly what was said when he himself was present at a speech, and the same applied to those who reported a speech to him from somewhere else. This much of his famous statement is clear, but he goes on to explain—although there is by no means general agreement on the interpretation of the passage—that his practice was to make speakers say what was required by the situation (in terms of persuading the listeners to do what the speaker wanted), while at the same time adhering as closely as possible to the overall argument. It is this latter part that is difficult: is Thucydides allowing for what we would call invention?

This has been one of the big questions about Polybius: does he, by modern standards, “make up” speeches? Or are they genuine attempts to report, as closely as circumstances allow, what was actually said? There is no simple answer, but perhaps part of the problem is a tendency to pose the question too starkly: are they historical or not? First of all, it is clear from the style that they are not verbatim reports. At a later point in the work (29.12.10), when talking about the massive scale on which a universal historian works, Polybius excuses his reports of battles or speeches if they are found to be using the same style, treatment, or even words—it is simply unavoidable in such a big work. Already for a modern readership, this is something substantially less than an accurate record of a speech—not the words that were actually said, but Polybius’ version of them. This should not surprise us. Although we do on occasion hear of speeches written up after delivery, in the vast majority of cases an ancient historian would not have a transcript available to him. In those circumstances, what does he do? This is where Polybius’ emphasis on personal inquiry comes into play and the corresponding downgrading of written sources. If you sit in a library, you may find some transcripts (or, presumably, although he does not say this, versions of speeches in the works of historical predecessors), but fundamentally there is no option but to make up your speeches. This is what Timaeus did, giving neither transcript nor accurate résumé of the speech, but inventing what he thinks should have been said, as if it was all a rhetorical exercise (12.25a.5). Polybius goes into considerable detail to demonstrate the childishly invented speeches Timaeus puts into the mouths of the Sicilian leaders Hermocrates and Timoleon (12.25k–26b). The diligent historian, on the other hand, has to get out and about like a modern reporter, interviewing witnesses and applying his experience in assessing who and what to ask and what the witnesses say.

A second divergence from what we might regard as an accurate account of a speech is created by the process of selection that Polybius advocates. Although it is sometimes hard to tell whether he is talking about speeches themselves or arguments in speeches—the Greek word *logoi* covers both meanings—it is reasonably clear that he thinks the historian should not record every possible speech, as Timaeus does, nor every argument used in every speech. He should select speeches and find out by diligent inquiry what was actually said in a given speech, but only report what was most vital and effective (12.25i.5, 36.1.7). Needless to say, the judgment required to make this selection can only come from a man of political experience.

There is another important aspect to speeches for Polybius. The special function of history in this matter is not just to find out what was actually said, but also “to ascertain the reason why what was done or said led to failure or success” (12.25b.1–2, 12.25i.8). In other words, he insists on fitting speeches into the chain of cause and consequence, which is the special quality of history. They are not for display. Obviously, if you just make them up to show off your rhetorical skills, you completely undermine their integral function in historical narrative and interpretation. Polybius’ speeches are, not surprisingly, full of political realities, historical recollections, and contemporary events.

The problem with assessing Polybius’ speeches for their historicity lies in applying too rigorous modern criteria. They are, in his ideal exposition, reconstructions of some of what was said, recast in his own words—quite a long way from what we would regard as an accurate report of a speech. Although they should ideally be rooted in reality rather than free composition, does he in fact always meet his own standards?

There is good reason to suppose that the prebattle speeches delivered by generals to their already deployed troops are something close to a complete fiction, both in Polybius and the other ancient historians. No doubt generals did seek to encourage their soldiers before battle, but the logistics of delivering a formal harangue, of the sort we read, to an army drawn up in line of battle cannot accord with reality. Even having Scipio Africanus deliver his speech before the battle of Zama in 202 BC marching along the front line does not make it any more realistic. After initially ordering company commanders to encourage their men, Hannibal too gives a set-piece speech, moving among the troops. Here, we are surely in the realms of fiction: how could Polybius possibly know what Hannibal said? (15.10–11). Both generals may well have seen that the troops got the sort of clichéd and platitudinous encouragement reported in the speeches, but it seems very probable that the conversion of this no doubt real encouragement

into a formal speech was simply a literary convention accepted in antiquity. I am not suggesting that it was necessarily Polybius who made up the speeches of Scipio and Hannibal—he may well have got them from a predecessor's history—but somebody did.

Battle speeches, I think, are a special case. More important is the question of whether Polybius allowed his historical interpretation to mold any of his political speeches, rather than the other way around. Probably the most discussed example is the famous speech of the Aetolian ambassador Agelaus at the peace conference in Naupactus in 217 BC that brought the Social War to an end (5.104). It is famous particularly for its presentation of the eventual winners in the Hannibalic war as clouds in the west about to darken Greece: "whether the Carthaginians beat the Romans or the Romans the Carthaginians in this war, it is not in the least likely that the victors will be content with the sovereignty of Italy and Sicily, but they are sure to come here and extend their ambitions beyond the bounds of justice." In the face of this threat, Agelaus urges the Greeks to unite for their common preservation. This conference marks the very point, according to Polybius, at which Mediterranean affairs first flowed as one: hereafter the leading Greeks, the islands, and Asia Minor all looked to Rome (5.105.4–10) and vice versa. Because it seems beyond doubt that Agelaus really did give a speech urging the cessation of hostilities, the question is, has Polybius' interpretation of history fashioned his version of what Agelaus said? The case has been argued both ways, and it is difficult to see how a decisive answer can be reached. It probably does not mean much that the cloud image reappears on two occasions (9.37.10, 38.16.3–4), because we have already seen that Polybius admits his own casting of speeches. The argument that Polybius' (or Agelaus') assessment of the situation in the west predates Greek attention to Rome, and Roman (or Carthaginian) interest in the east, has some force, but probably not enough to persuade us that Polybius has made a case that Agelaus did not argue. There were many speeches delivered at Naupactus, but, in Polybius' view, only Agelaus had something interesting to say (12.103.8–9). A mere proposal for peace could hardly be exceptional, as Polybius has already told us that Philip himself proposed peace and the Aetolians readily accepted. What was it about Agelaus' speech that made it stand out, if not his interesting assessment of the western threat to Greek political life?

For most people, it is hard to imagine a historian who would be quite so brazenly dishonest as to ignore completely his own repeated strictures against making up speeches. Conditions in the ancient world no doubt necessitated a greater degree of recasting and creative reconstruction than modern writers would contemplate, but there

seems to be a reasonably good chance that Polybius did, on the whole, abide by his own standards.

When you just have the case for the prosecution, so to speak, it is not easy to tell how strong a case it is. It must be said, however, that Polybius' case against Timaeus in book 12, at least with regard to big issues, looks powerful. The accusations we have examined concern important matters of historical methodology, revolving around the central fact that Timaeus was an armchair historian. Polybius also accuses him of excessive nitpicking, pedantic irrelevance, inaccuracy, inappropriate abuse of other authors, deliberate falsehood (and not just by inventing speeches), lack of propriety, love of paradox. Whether or not these charges are convincing, just making them implies, of course, that Polybius was guilty of none of them. Although he paraded some high-minded notions about criticism in general—other people's faults cannot be seen automatically as your own virtues, and the whole process of criticism was supposed to be for the general good (16.20.6)—the main value of polemic is precisely in defining your own qualities. By revealing the weaknesses of others, you reveal your strengths, without having to sing your own praises too obviously.

From the modern point of view it is surprising to observe how weak and ineffective some of Polybius' criticisms of other writers are. His extended analysis of Callisthenes' account of Alexander the Great's victory at the battle of Issus in 333 BC is a good example (12.17–22). It is nearly all to do with length of battle line or marching column taken in relation to the actual terrain. Theoretically it should be a sound point: his accusation is that Callisthenes suggested a deployment of troops that was simply impossible given the measurements of how much space an individual soldier takes up and how much room was actually available on the ground. An experienced military man, then, shows that Callisthenes did not really know what he was talking about on this practical matter. In fact, however, as Walbank (*Historical Commentary*, 2:264) says, “his points are almost all trivial or fallacious; and his mathematical calculations are marred by egregious errors of logical reasoning and gross carelessness.” It is almost as if Polybius did not really care about the strength of the detailed arguments. What mattered was the attack itself and the general problem at issue, military knowledge—he had it, Callisthenes did not.

Polybius' Working Methods

After all this theory and criticism of what other historians do, it might be well to end this chapter with a brief consideration of how Polybius

himself proceeded when he actually sat down to start writing—although, without the literary sources he used, our knowledge of the process can only be very sketchy. His emphasis on the importance of personal research, interviewing eyewitnesses, walking the terrain, and so on should not obscure what must have been, at least in the first half of the work, a heavy reliance on written history.

Polybius says he is going to start in 220 BC because he was present at some events himself thereafter and had the testimony of eyewitnesses for others (4.2.2), but it is inconceivable that he put forty books of history together on the basis of oral evidence, and he does not claim to have done so. We can be misled by his assertion that the study of literary (or documentary) sources was the least important of the three parts of history: it may have been the least important, but that does not necessarily mean it was the least used. Polybius was born probably around the end of the Hannibalic War, which occurs in book 15, and he can scarcely have had worthwhile memories of events until about 190 BC, which takes us to book 21. The bulk of these twenty books or so must have come from existing historical works (occasionally, he does use inscriptions, as, for instance, in quoting the terms of the treaties between Rome and Carthage [3.22–28], or the military dispositions Hannibal made at the beginning of the Second Punic War, which he inscribed on a bronze tablet [3.33.17–18]). Criticism of Timaeus, Fabius, Philinus, Phylarchus, and others does not mean he did not use them. What is vital for Polybius is that you cannot just blindly follow your predecessors; you must be able to apply extensive military and political experience, coupled with detailed geographical and topographical knowledge, to the critical evaluation of the sources, whether written or oral. He could abandon or adjust a written account of the war against Hannibal when he had better information from his close friend, Scipio Aemilianus, or from a host of other informants. For instance, he had access to a letter Scipio wrote to Philip V of Macedon about the capture of New Carthage (10.9.3). He could identify the bias of Philinus or Fabius and steer a route between them. In contrast to the writers who had sensationalized the subject, he could speak with authority on Hannibal's crossing of the Alps because he had followed the route himself and interviewed people who were with Hannibal (3.48.12). He knew what to trust or distrust in Timaeus. At all times, the application of critical judgment based on experience and research defines Polybius' method, even, or perhaps particularly, when he is using the work of other historians.

As he got older and more centrally involved in political affairs, it is probable that written histories became less important to him, at least for certain zones of his work. He was himself a leading Greek

politician, right at the center of affairs, and his account of Macedonian and Achaean history in the 180s and 170s, and indeed even more so later on, might well have been composed very largely from his own experiences and memoranda, supplemented, both at the time and later in Rome, by discussions and interviews with all the leading figures of the day. His immediate knowledge and experience of Syrian and Egyptian history must have been somewhat less substantial. Apart from Zeno of Rhodes, who wrote about Ptolemaic affairs, and whom, as we have seen, Polybius discusses, we do not know of other written accounts that he used for Egypt. He undoubtedly had access to excellent diplomatic sources—embassies from all over the East poured into Rome while he was there—but it seems unlikely he had no other written narratives to work with.

Without the survival of the histories that Polybius used, we cannot say how he adapted them. To the extent that he discusses them, it is usually when he disagrees with them. This seems to imply that he followed them closely in the parts with which he agreed. For instance, he says he has chosen to follow Aratus on the Cleomenean War (2.56.2); to justify this decision, he spends some time discrediting Phylarchus, who was also deemed a reliable source on the subject. Although we are probably never going to know Polybius' techniques of adaptation, in the way we know something of how the Roman historian Livy adapted Polybius, we can say from the complete books of Polybius that he did not produce some clumsy cut-and-paste job. As we will see in the next chapter, he wrote a clear and coherent narrative that was very much the product of his own artistry.

Further Reading

Excellent accounts of the main developments of Greek history writing will be found in Hornblower (1994, 1–73), Luce (1997), Marincola (2001). On Polybius' Hellenistic historical perspective, see Millar (1987). The most valuable discussion of the role of polemic among the historians of antiquity is Marincola (1997, 217–36). All the main authors discuss what Polybius says about history: see, for instance, Walbank (1972, 66–96) and particularly Sacks (1981), a work entirely devoted to the subject; the Budé edition of book 12 by Pédech (1961b) also contains helpful introduction and notes. Schepens (1990, 39–61) argues convincingly against Sacks on the purpose of book 12. Alonzo-Núñez (2002) traces the origins and development of universal history. On “tragic history,” see Walbank (1960, 224–41). Marincola (2003) is important on the emotions and history. Derow (1994) is good on causation in the Greek historians. Walbank's commentary offers, as

usual, fundamental assistance with the fragmentary predecessors and contemporaries of Polybius, and now there is a useful set of essays on the subject, Schepens and Bollansée (2005). On truth, prejudice, and historical “invention,” Wiseman (1979) and Woodman (1988) have been hugely influential; see also Kraus and Woodman (1997, 4–6). The most important work on Polybius and geography is Clarke (1999, 77–128), but Walbank (1948) and Pédech (1964, 515–97) are still valuable. Wooten (1974) offers a clear analysis of the function and nature of speeches in Polybius; Hansen (1993) argues convincingly against the authenticity of battle speeches; and Champion (1997) is very helpful not just on Agelaus’ speech, but on the criteria by which we can assess the historicity of Polybius’ speeches.

1. “The king ordered [*keleusantos*] everyone to state their opinion [i.e., ‘how it appeared,’ in Greek *to phainomenon*]” (Pol. 5.41.6–7); “I order [*keleuon*] you to reveal [i.e., ‘to make appear,’ in Greek *apophainesthai*] your opinion freely” (Hdt. 7.8.d2).

2. “What particular property it has that makes it by nature [*pephukenai*] the opposite of other rivers” (Hdt 2.19); “why it has a nature [*phusin*] opposite to most other rivers” (Pol. 9.43).

3

Art and History: The Narrative of Books 4 and 5

In books 4 and 5 Polybius introduces us to the Hellenistic kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean, particularly the three main units into which Alexander's huge empire split after his death—the Antigonids of Macedon, the Seleucids of Syria, and the Ptolemies of Egypt. It was primarily Rome's victories over the first two of these that established her unquestioned dominance in the eastern Mediterranean, so the story of these kingdoms is of central importance in the work. Polybius' explanatory mode, however, is directed primarily at Rome: it is Rome that needs explaining. This in itself might call for an analysis of particular institutions or political and cultural practices among Rome's enemies, and we certainly get some of that, but on the whole he assumes that the reader is familiar with the Greek world and does not need the same systematic explanation of it. Although obviously there is extensive coverage of the history of the Hellenistic states, Polybius does not explicitly offer (in what survives) any developed political theory of how a kingdom works. We are, on the whole, left with a story rather than an explanation.

Probably most modern discussion of Polybius tends to focus first on his more analytic passages, rather than the way he tells his story, but in this chapter it is the latter I want to examine. How does Polybius devise his narrative of the Hellenistic kings and their courtiers? How does the story unfold? Stressing narrative is perhaps truer to ancient emphases—it was what happened that audiences wanted to read about—but it also offers the opportunity to bring out what seems to me an underappreciated strength of the author. We have had occasion to observe that Polybius was not a sharp stylist in terms of writing beautiful Greek, but he did produce a narrative of carefully contrived design. It is aspects of this design that I want to investigate in this chapter. To do so, one needs complete books. The reader will find a very detailed narrative of the end of the Ptolemaic adviser Agathocles

in book 15, and throughout the fragmentary books there are all sorts of other bits and pieces about courtiers, but you cannot really see how excerpts like these fit into the overall narrative. The first five are the only books where we have Polybius in full operational mode as a historian, and in this chapter we will be trying to take advantage of that situation.

First, a contextual matter. Scattered throughout the work Polybius has a number of statements about conspiracy and plotting. They are not written up into any organized presentation, but they do impinge on his whole attitude to and treatment of Hellenistic courts. Here is what he says.

Although set in a military context in the Hannibalic war, the statement of faults at 3.81.9 that leave a general open to plotting might be extended to other spheres: "Haste, excessive boldness and irrational anger, as well as boastfulness and conceit, are easy for his enemies to take advantage of, and dangerous to his staff. For such a general is vulnerable to all manner of plot, ambush and deceit." Polybius has just been talking of Hannibal, and he is the very opposite of such a general. Powerful proof of his brilliant leadership is the fact that although he spent seventeen years in the field in the most extraordinarily challenging conditions, not a single person plotted against him or deserted him (23.13.2). The same with Hiero of Syracuse: he ruled so well for fifty-four years that no one plotted against him (7.8.4). Massinissa, king of Numidia, reigned for over sixty years, and although he had ten sons, they were all on such good terms that there was no plotting or family discord (36.16.6). Quite the opposite for Philip V of Macedon, who suffered the terrible misfortune of his sons plotting against each other (23.10.13). When kingship turns into tyranny, conspiracies begin to be formed (6.7.9). One of the signs of a king turning into a tyrant is a requirement that his sexual demands, however lawless, be met. Because tyranny injures more people and has, therefore, more conspiring against it, it needs many mercenaries, whereas democracy needs none at all (11.13.7). Too much money can be a source of plotting also: Attalus I used his wealth with intelligence and daring, but without these qualities, wealth is mostly disastrous, for it generates envy and plotting (18.41.4). One of the clearest examples of what a king should not be is Ptolemy IV Philopator. He was, as we have seen, an oversexed drunk who proved inattentive and unpleasant to his courtiers and administrators in Egypt itself, and paid no attention whatever to Egyptian foreign policy. In no time at all, as you would expect, Polybius says, he attracted numerous conspiracies against his life and throne (5.34.4–10).

So there is in Polybius a strong notion that the best leaders, the best kings, should not attract plots. Seeing that a great deal of what

survives about the Hellenistic courts concerns plotting and conspiracies, we can only take it as an indication of Polybius' generally very low opinion of Hellenistic monarchies. Let us turn now to the narrative of the kings in books 4 and 5.

Philip V of Macedon

The year 220 BC is a good starting point, Polybius tells us, because Fortune rebuilt the world at that time: Philip V became king of Macedon; Achaeus in Asia Minor had the power of a king, and Antiochus III had recently ascended the Seleucid throne; Ariarathes IV took over the throne of Cappadocia (central Turkey), Ptolemy IV that of Egypt, Lycurgus that of Sparta; and Hannibal had been appointed commander of the Carthaginian forces in Spain. With so many new personalities, new events were bound to happen, and so they did: Rome and Carthage fought the Second Punic War, Syria and Egypt fought for possession of Coele-Syria (roughly modern Israel), and the Aetolians fought against Philip V with his Achaean allies. This latter conflict, known as the Social War (220–217 BC), is the main point of interest in book 4, taking up sixty-six chapters out of eighty-seven, and both beginning and ending the book.

Philip's introduction into the story is gradual and unobtrusive. He is mentioned first in chapters 2, 3, and 5, with an emphasis on his youth; he was only a boy when he came to the throne (4.2.5). This is important information, as it is presented as an element in the causes of the Social War: for, Polybius says, as long as Antigonus ruled in Macedon, the Aetolians were cowed into inactivity, but when he died, leaving the young Philip as his successor, they thought they could ignore the boy and intervene in the Peloponnese (4.3.2–3). Narratology, the theoretical study of narrative, identifies this as information that is “focalized” through the Aetolians: it is the way *the Aetolians* see the situation, a view not necessarily correct or shared by the narrator, whom, in simple terms, we may take as Polybius. Focalization is an important part of the way that Polybius presents the narrative, and I will be referring to it frequently. This Aetolian interpretation of the situation led Dorimachos, “a young man full of the violent and aggressive spirit of the Aetolians” (4.3.5), into various acts of aggression in the Peloponnese. The war did not formally start until the Achaean League voted for it in chapter 25, but hostilities were in full swing by that stage, and the fighting in the Peloponnese before the formal outbreak of war seems to function as a sort of narrative anticipation of Philip's campaigns: we are introduced to the cities and terrain where he will soon be in action.

In [chapter 5](#), Dorimachus urges Skopas to join him in attacking Messenia, on the grounds that they would be quite safe from Macedonia, Philip being only seventeen years old—a slightly different focalization this time, not the Aetolians in general, but specifically Dorimachus. As the story of Aetolian aggression develops, Aratus is Polybius' first main character: he leads the initial Achaean attempt—before the intervention of Macedon—to ward off the incursions of the Aetolians. Aratus was one of the great figures of the Achaean League, but much as Polybius admired him, he was also honest enough, as we have already seen, to admit Aratus' extensive military failings (chapter 8); and after the formal war vote of the league (chapter 25), Aratus yields in the narrative to the dominance of Philip. We scarcely hear about him again until he becomes embroiled as the archenemy of the wicked courtier Apelles in the court intrigues that end the book. In response to the Aetolian threat, the Messenians ask to join the Achaean League (4.9), but the magistrates refuse to proceed without consulting Philip and the other allies. By chapter 13 Polybius can identify Aetolian aggression as the cause of and stated reason for the war, its beginning being the war decision of the allies at Corinth under the presidency of Philip. This last notice is actually advance information, out of correct chronological sequence, because, as we have seen, the narrative does not reach the war decision until chapter 25. Narrative displacement of this sort, where we, the readers of the narrative (the narratee) are told about something either before it takes place (a proleptic statement) or after (an analeptic statement), can be an important part of the way an author manipulates time to create a particular effect. We will need to keep in mind what the effect might be when Polybius gives advance notice of an event or holds back information. In the present case, it is difficult to see any obvious historical intention in telling us about the war decision ahead of its actual occurrence; it is much more likely to do with Polybius' famous distinction between cause, pretext, and beginning. As the elements of this distinction belong so closely together, when he discusses them, obviously he discusses them together. Philip and the Epirots listened to the Achaean envoys sent to them and accepted the Messenians into the alliance.

Chapters 22 to 29 contain the first continuous narrative of Philip in action. In chapter 22 he arrives at Corinth in response to Aratus' plea for help. He is too late, Aratus having lost a battle already, but he calls the allies to a conference and sets off to deal with internal troubles developing at Sparta. Here three of the five annually elected chief magistrates of the state, called ephors, were taking the Aetolian side, convinced that Philip was too young to control Peloponnesian affairs. This is the third different focalization of this point about Philip being

too young to manage. We have had the Aetolians generally, and then Dorimachus specifically; now we see the same opinion focalized through three of the Spartan ephors. The reader has not yet been told anything definite about the validity or otherwise of this view: Polybius has not, so to speak, taken responsibility for it—it is simply the way certain of the parties involved see the situation, important because this view is dictating their action and contributing to the development of the situation. I think the reader might begin to feel that there is suspicious overkill on the matter. Why are we hearing so much about Philip's youth? Is this interpretation of Philip's limited capacity correct, or is his youth being set up to enable him to triumph by overcoming it? For the moment, as so often in Polybius, things turn out contrary to expectation (4.22.6): the Aetolians withdraw swiftly, and even more swiftly Philip makes an appearance from Macedon. This is the first reference to Philip's speed, a theme Polybius later develops and links with that of the king's youthfulness (I discuss this later in the chapter). The pro-Macedonian ephor Adeimantus, along with other named and unnamed victims, is murdered by the pro-Aetolian ephors, who try to divert Philip away from Sparta. He listens, but asks them to return at once and tells the ephors that he will continue his march to Tegea, where they should send, as soon as possible, people in authority to discuss the situation. This is a firm and measured response: there is nothing to imply that anyone other than the king is in complete control. The Spartans make their case at the king's council, but there is disagreement among the members about how to react. Some advise Philip to make a brutal example of the Spartans, in the way Alexander the Great treated Thebes at the beginning of his reign; others caution against too heavy a revenge and suggest he punish the guilty parties and put his own people in control. Finally Philip speaks. Here, Polybius introduces for the first time the importance of courtiers (4.24.1–3):

Finally the king spoke, if indeed we can really talk about the king's own opinions; for it is improbable that a boy of seventeen would be able to decide about such grave matters. It is, however, the task of us writers to attribute to the ruler the expression of opinion that prevails at his council; while readers should work out for themselves that such decisions and the arguments on which they rest are probably due to his associates and especially to those closest to the king personally. In the present case Aratus is the one to whom we may most plausibly attribute the decision delivered by the king.

So it seems that a seventeen-year-old boy can scarcely be credited with making such weighty decisions all on his own. Writers have to

simplify the decision-making process by attributing all policy to the king, whereas in fact it is more complicated. In the present case, Polybius surmises, without explaining why, Aratus was probably the one behind the policy that emerged. He does not know it was Aratus; this was just the way courts worked in general, and he makes a guess based on this. It is a curious and, as we will see, discordant guess, repeated in 5.12, and I will return to it. We now appear, however, to have Polybius' own view of Philip's youth: in all likelihood, he says, a young king like this is not the one who is going to be making the big decisions. He seems to be implying that those who regarded the king as too young to rule were right; he was not really in charge, in the way he would have been if he was older. For the moment, we can observe that the whole scene of the council meeting introduces the theme of the court and the king's advisers that is going to play such an important role in the subsequent account. Having raised the matter of who makes the decisions, Polybius immediately returns to his writer's mode and describes the action simply in terms of the king. Philip's response to the situation is measured and restrained: the Spartan action had not damaged the alliance as a whole, so harsh punishment was not required. This decision "gave the allies a good example of his policy principles" (5.24.9).

With the allied deputies assembled at Corinth, Philip held a council to discuss what to do about the Aetolians. They vote unanimously for war in chapter 25, although Philip writes to the Aetolians, reasonably offering them the opportunity to explain themselves, but adding that they must be mad if they think the Greeks will not seek retaliation for the wrongs done to them. He then returns to Macedon to prepare for war, having given the allies and all the Greeks "a happy prospect of his mildness and royal magnanimity" (4.27.10). In chapter 29 we find him wintering, diligently levying troops, and protecting Macedon's frontiers. He also met the Illyrian chieftain Scerdilaidas, courageously putting himself in the man's power and easily bringing him over to the Macedonian side—brave, decisive action, the king fully in charge. The scene then changes to Messenia, Sparta, and Aetolia and the preliminary war moves (31–37), before Polybius breaks off the Social War and moves to the war of Byzantium and Rhodes, and the situation in Crete and Sinope.

When he resumes coverage of the Social War in chapter 57, Polybius briefly mentions Philip before dealing with affairs in the Peloponnese (4.57–60) and then puts Philip center stage for chapters 61 to 73. At the beginning of book 4, Philip gradually grew into the narrative, so to speak; now he is the most important part of it. It is a story of great military success, with the king continuing to display courage and decisive leadership. He captures one town after another—

Ambracus, Phoetiae, Ithoria, Paianion, Oeniadae—and repeatedly defeats the enemy. In chapter 66 he hears the Dardani are planning to invade Macedonia and rushes back. I have already alluded to Philip's speed, and his return from Macedonia to the Peloponnese in chapters 67–69 brings it out fully, effectively set off by focalization. We see things first through the eyes of the Peloponnesians in general. With the onset of winter, everyone had given up hope that Philip would come, but he brought an army to Corinth with such speed and secrecy that no one in the Peloponnese was aware of what had happened (4.67.6–8). We then get a nice picture of the main players, Philip, the Aetolian general Euripidas, and the Elean army, all stumbling around in ignorance of each other's presence: we, the narratee, have all the necessary information, but the protagonists themselves do not. Euripidas finally discovers Philip's arrival when he chances upon some Cretans in the Macedonian army. But he does not tell anyone and makes off when the Eleans encounter the Macedonian army. Their officers thought it must be an Achaean force, but when they found out, the Eleans fled. The Peloponnesians were astonished at all this: "for they heard at the same time of the king's arrival and of his victory" (4.69.9). This little episode is framed by the Peloponnesians' ignorance at the beginning and their astonishment at the end, neatly conveying how fast Philip had moved.

After this lightning march south, Philip moves on to capture Psophis (4.70–72). It has been well observed that there are many cities in the work of Polybius regarded as all but impregnable and assaulted for that very reason. Among numerous examples, the Roman general Aemilius Paullus attacked the city of Dimale during the Second Illyrian War (220 BC), precisely because it had a reputation for impregnability and because he saw how confident the defenders were in its natural strength and the measures they had taken (3.18.3). This sort of thinking has at its base the views expressed by the Cretan strategist Lagoras when Antiochus III was trying to capture Sardis in 214 BC (7.15–18). Lagoras had observed that

as a rule it is the strongest cities which fall most easily into the hands of the enemy. This is due to the negligence of the inhabitants, who, relying on the natural or man-made strength of the place, fail to guard it properly and become generally lazy. He also noticed that these cities are usually captured at their very strongest points where the enemy are assumed to regard attack as hopeless.

For Lagoras, and Polybius, it was all about perception, not reality; or rather, perception was the reality. People act according to how they see matters and how they think others will see them. As we noted in

the introduction, Scipio Africanus attacked New Carthage in 210 BC because it was an important Carthaginian base, but also because no one was expecting him to: “no one dreamt that while the Carthaginians were masters of nearly the whole of Spain it would enter anyone’s mind to besiege the city” (10.8.4). The complacency of the Carthaginians had led them to leave too small a defending force in place. Although Psophis was strongly defended both by nature and human effort, Philip was tempted into attacking it because of its strategic importance. On this occasion, Polybius does not say that the complacency of the defenders was a factor in Philip’s decision, but when the attack begins the defenders are astonished: “Euripidas and everyone in the town were demoralized by this, as they had been convinced that the enemy would neither attempt to assault such a strong city, nor begin a long siege at this difficult time of the year.” So shocked were they by the decision taken so late in the campaigning season, that they began to suspect internal treachery. In the end, the defenders surrendered and made terms with Philip, who gave the town to the Achaeans. He also gave them Lasion and moved on to Elis (4.71–73). There is a pause then while Polybius talks about peace and immunity in Elis (4.73–75).

Up to this point Polybius has presented Philip as a dynamic leader and general, fast-moving, brave, and militarily very successful, creating high hopes for the future. His youth has been emphasized as exercising the minds of various Greek protagonists, and by Polybius himself on that one occasion in chapter 24, where he made a guess about the advice of Aratus. That was the only thing to suggest that Philip was anything other than his own man, making the decisions, leading the army, doing what a good king should do. Aratus is the only other person in the court whose name has even been mentioned, and he faded from the picture when Philip took command of the war against the Aetolians. In the narrative, to all intents and purposes Philip has so far stood alone—and we are now close to the end of book 4.

In chapter 76, however, Apelles is introduced. He and his fellow conspirators and their antagonism toward Aratus are going to be the big story that links books 4 and 5, which run together as a single unit. He was, Polybius tells us, one of the guardians of the young Philip left by Antigonus, and he now enjoyed great influence with the king. This is, in narratological terms, an analeptic displacement—that is, information that belongs chronologically before the story events that are being recounted at a particular point. We were informed of Antigonus’ death at the very beginning of book 4. Polybius observed then that Philip was just a boy when he succeeded to the throne, so he had an excellent opportunity to mention Apelles at that moment if he

had wanted to. But he did not take the opportunity; although Apelles has been there all along, we have heard nothing about him until now. When we come to the beginning of the reigns of Ptolemy IV and Antiochus III, we will see that courtiers are immediately introduced to the scene. So there was nothing unavoidable in the way Polybius has kept silent about Apelles: he has held him back on purpose, and we must ask why. I suggest a twofold reason. First, it leaves the field clear for Philip to establish himself as his own master; the narrative can play out, so to speak, the theme of his youthfulness, without giving the game away. Second, it is a way of emphasizing the good beginning to Philip's reign. As Polybius is just about to tell us, eventually it all went horribly wrong and Philip turned into a monster. This piece of information coincides with the introduction of court intrigue into the narrative. The message will be clear: Philip on his own had the makings of a superb king; bring in the court, and he was doomed.

Apelles forms a plan to reduce the Achaeans to subject status and begins to push them around; he thought they would get used to it and know their place. The young Achaeans tell Aratus, Aratus tells Philip, and he orders Apelles not to give instructions to the Achaeans without first consulting their strategos. Philip acts decisively—Apelles seems to have been put in his place—but the themes of the wicked courtier and the antagonism between two leading courtiers, which are going to dominate coverage of the Hellenistic courts, are introduced.

These themes are immediately set aside for a moment while Polybius offers his first major assessment of Philip's reign in chapter 77. It is very favorable. His performance was gaining him a good reputation, not just with those under his command, but with all the rest of the Peloponnesians. Intelligent, with a good memory and the authority of a king, he was charming, as well as able and brave as a general. But now we get that proleptic reference to future disaster I have just mentioned, a sort of dramatic foreshadowing: what went wrong? What, Polybius asks, turned Philip from a natural king into a savage tyrant? It is not an easy question to answer, he says, and he will discuss it at a more suitable moment, but perhaps, as I have suggested, the reader has had the way pointed out. The juxtaposition of Apelles' introduction and the evaluation of Philip is suggestive. The assessment of Philip does not have to come here—we are not at the end of a campaigning season or any particularly decisive moment. In his narrative of the campaign, Polybius has built Philip up into an effective and excellent young king, full of promise; he then introduces Apelles and immediately summarizes Philip's achievements so far, with a question for future consideration: what went wrong? Apelles is the only new element in the story at this point, and it seems likely that Polybius is pointing the finger at him, or possibly at Philip's

weakness in taking the advice of wicked courtiers. Indeed, when Polybius does come to give his answer (at 7.11.13–14), it is just that. As long as Philip followed Aratus' advice, everything was fine and the king enjoyed the affection of all the Greeks. But when he allowed the wicked Demetrius to lead him astray, "he lost both the affection of his allies and the confidence of the other Greeks": "Of such decisive importance for young kings is the judicious choice of courtiers who attend on them. It leads either to misfortune or to the firm establishment of their kingdom, but is a matter to which most of them nonchalantly devote no care at all." At least one of the secrets of being a successful young king was the ability to take the right advice. Apelles seems to represent at court level the same sort of challenge Philip is facing militarily against the Aetolians, and the same question applies: can he manage Apelles, or is he really too young?

In the military context, we have already seen enough to suggest that Philip was well able to meet the challenge, and further narrative of the course of the Social War reinforces this impression (78–82). By chapter 82 there appears the first sign of a change in the general perception of Philip's youthfulness: he is in Argos, admired for his all-round behavior and exploits "beyond his years." In the Greek word for "admired" (*tethaumasmenos*) there is an implied focalization of public opinion: this is how people were now seeing the situation—Philip was performing "beyond his years." Within a short time we will receive confirmation that in court circles, too, Philip would soon dispel any doubts about who was master.

At this point, the Apelles story returns and dominates the narrative; the last chapters of the book are almost entirely about the Apelles–Aratus opposition. Apelles believes that the two Aratuses, father and son, stand in his way, so he plans to discredit them with Philip. He persuades Philip to attend the elections for Achaean strategos; and he gets his own candidate, Eperatus, elected against Aratus' candidate. Encouraged by the election of Eperatus, Apelles trumps up false accusations against Aratus, accusing him of suborning Amphidamas to tell the Eleans to turn down generous peace terms. The pace of the narrative slows right down as the story of the dispute between the two courtiers is developed in detail. Eventually the charge against Aratus is found to be false. Philip begins to esteem Aratus more from this day and be suspicious of Apelles; nonetheless, he is forced by his complete acceptance of Apelles into overlooking many of his actions (4.86.8). He is not yet quite his own master, a situation in which Antiochos III also finds himself later (5.50.5).

Chapter 87 brings the book to a close by opening up the court and its intrigues to fuller inspection. Apelles targets Taurion, the officer put in charge of the Peloponnese by Antigonus. We have heard of him

before (4.6.4), but not in connection with the Apelles story. Apelles now overpraises him, a new way of attacking your enemy, Polybius says, devised particularly by courtiers “to serve their mutual jealousies and ambitions” (4.87.4). Apelles also attacks Alexander, head of Philip’s bodyguard, because he wants the job. He may be the Alexander mentioned in book 2 in connection with Antigonus (2.66.7, 2.68.1–2), but he is new to Philip’s story, and we get another backward (analeptic) glance at Antigonus’ arrangements on his death. This is the way Apelles had been introduced in chapter 76, and in his case it is repeated that he had been installed as one of the king’s guardians at the very beginning of his reign. Now we get the rest of the cast, so to speak. Antigonus had also left Leontius as commander of the peltasts (an elite corps of the Macedonian army), Megaleas as secretary of state, Taurion in charge of the Peloponnese, and Alexander captain of the bodyguard. Leontius and Megaleas are entirely new to us, although of course this whole group has been there all along, but held back—for the same reason, I suggest, as Apelles: Polybius does not want the scene cluttered with courtiers, distracting attention away from Philip. Apelles has Leontius and Megaleas in his pocket, and he wants to get rid of Alexander and Taurion to put his own people in those posts. What he failed to reckon with was the opposition of Aratus. And here we have another proleptic displacement, in this case a very important one, looking to the end of the story. Apelles “was soon to experience the consequence of his folly and greed for power: for what he had plotted to bring upon his colleagues, he had to suffer himself within a very short space of time” (4.87.10–11). So now we know Philip wins, although we do not know how. The whole notion of the incapable youngster is beginning to fall apart, and the remaining references to Philip’s youth complete the demolition.

The scene is set for book 5. Polybius has the main players on stage and has introduced the main theme (Apelles and his intrigues against Philip and Aratus) that will make the link with and dominate the opening of book 5. The good beginning of Philip’s reign has been highlighted by keeping the courtiers *out* of the picture early on. Then, gradually they have pushed themselves forward into the narrative, Apelles first, followed by the other leading figures, so that by the end of the book the story of the Social War has had to yield almost entirely to court intrigue. At this juncture, however, we know already that the outcome will demonstrate Philip’s dominance.

In the first twenty-nine chapters of book 5, the Social War continues, and there is some purely military narrative, but the main story line is Apelles and his associates’ intrigues. It is a good story, perhaps rather better than unrelieved military narrative. Philip

immediately realizes he has been wrong about Apelles and decides to back Aratus. Apelles forms a conspiracy, of distinctly vague purpose, with Megaleas and Leontius (5.2.7–8). They were to stay with the king and damage his interests as best they could; Apelles himself would go to Chalcis and try to cut off military supplies. Leontius keeps his part of the agreement, and, so Polybius claims, sabotages Philip's military efforts and plans. He deliberately prevents his soldiers from capturing the city of Palus (5.4.10–13), he gives advice to Philip that will detain him in Messenia all summer (5.5.5–8), and he tries to slow Philip's swift advance to Thermum. In this latter case we might note again the motif of attacking an apparently impregnable place (5.7.1–2). It was Leontius' perception of the situation that the Aetolians would be unable to withstand Philip's advance for two reasons. First, they would be caught unaware by the speed of his march. Second, "never imagining that Philip would so readily commit his forces to the country round Thermum owing to its great natural strength, they would be caught off guard and absolutely unprepared for such an event." On each occasion, however, assisted by Aratus, Philip understands what Leontius is up to, and, most important, takes the right advice. We see Philip's understanding through his own eyes. At Palus, Aratus is not mentioned, but, aware of the attempt to sabotage the siege, Philip breaks it off and sensibly consults with his courtiers about what to do next. In the debate about whether to assist the Messenians, Leontius makes his pernicious case; it is countered by Aratus, and Philip, already suspicious of Leontius because of what had happened at Palus, "decided to follow the advice of Aratus." The situation is almost exactly repeated in the attack on Thermum: Leontius' stalling advice is followed by Aratus' correct interpretation, Philip's distrust of Leontius, and his decision to take Aratus' advice. The repetition serves to build dramatic tension: this surely cannot continue indefinitely—how is it going to be resolved?

In chapters 9 to 12 there is another substantial narrative pause while Polybius stops to assess Philip's destruction of Thermum. He regards the event as an important moment in Philip's career. All he had done so far had been fair and in conformity with the rules of war, but the treatment of Thermum was excessive (5.9.2–3):

For mindful of what the Aetolians had done at Dium and Dodona they burnt the colonnades and destroyed the rest of the valuable votive offerings, some of which were most elaborate and expensive works. And not only did they damage the roofs of these buildings by the fire, but they razed them to the ground. They also overturned the statues (there were more than two thousand of them) and destroyed many of them, but spared those that

represented gods or bore inscribed dedications to gods.

Polybius cites what he regards as superior exemplars of Macedonian mildness: the treatment of Sparta by Antigonus, of Athens by Philip II, or even of Thebes by Alexander the Great. (In view of the fact that Alexander razed Thebes to the ground and sold its inhabitants into slavery, this last is a somewhat strained analogy, even if Alexander did leave the temples and Pindar's house standing.) These would have been better models to adopt than the Aetolian brutality to Dium and Dodona. If Philip had followed the example of his Macedonian ancestors he would have inherited "not so much their kingdom as their high principles and magnanimity." By abandoning their principles, he lost the reputation that went with them, and "as he advanced in years his general reputation came to be the reverse of theirs."

Polybius displays here exactly the same sort of attitude as he brought to bear on his discussion of the Roman plundering of Syracuse after its capture in 211 BC. It is perfectly acceptable to strengthen your own position and weaken that of the enemy by destroying strategic targets—forts, harbors, cities, men, ships, crops—"but to do wanton damage to temples, statues and all such works with absolutely no prospect of any resulting military advantage to our own side, or disadvantage to the enemy, must be characterised as the work of a frenzied mind at the height of its fury" (5.11.4). This is, in short, the act of a tyrant who seeks to impose his will by fear, in contrast to a king, who rules over a willing people, "earning their love by his generosity and humanity."

Polybius does make a strong case that it was a good opportunity (missed) to win a noble reputation and the admiration of the Aetolians. But he also reverts to his earlier comment on Philip's youth: perhaps we should not wholly blame such a young king, but his advisers (5.12.5–8). He picks out Aratus and, this time, Demetrius of Pharos. Demetrius had a role in Illyrian affairs in book 3, and he also appeared earlier in book 4, but for the reader this is a new court opposition, Aratus–Demetrius. Polybius says it is not difficult to guess which one probably gave Philip the advice about Thermum: he means Demetrius, because we know on a later occasion the nature of the advice offered by both. This is a reference to the situation in Messene in 215/214 BC (7.10–14), when Demetrius advised the king to seize the fortress of Ithome treacherously, but Aratus dissuaded him. Before that, on Philip's arrival, Plutarch (*Aratus* 49.3–5) tells us that the civil unrest in Messene had exploded into violence in which the magistrates and 200 citizens had been killed. Polybius clearly blames this on the corrupting influence on Philip of Demetrius, Aratus only arriving the

following day (7.13.6). Such evidence, for Polybius, proves that Demetrius was responsible for the advice Philip followed in relation to Thermum, although for us it remains rather woolly speculation.

After a brief interlude to describe Philip campaigning successfully in chapter 13, we return to the conspiracy in chapters 14–16. We are given considerable detail on the row between Aratus and the drunken Leontius and Megaleas, a scene vaguely reminiscent, it seems to me, of the drunken row between Alexander the Great and his friend Cleitus (depicted in, for instance, Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.8). We have the same dissatisfied, rather long-faced courtiers, who get drunk and insultingly assault, in this case not the king, but his top adviser. Crinon (a new figure) and Megaleas are fined and arrested until they pay. Leontius stands surety for Megaleas, and attempts (unsuccessfully) to intimidate the king. This scene is focalized through Leontius and is the first specific unraveling of the theme of Philip's youthfulness: Leontius takes some of his soldiers with him, "confident that he would intimidate the king, who was but a boy, and soon make him change his mind" (5.16.2–3). But Philip stands up to him—clear evidence that the "boy" is in fact no boy—and Leontius goes off in a huff.

If Leontius is the first to have to confront the error of his thinking about Philip, he is soon followed by the Spartans. In their case, it is Philip's speed that particularly leads them to adjust their assessment of him. At the end of book 4, which is full of passing references to the king's speed, Polybius reported Philip's conquest of the whole of Triphylia in six days (4.80.14). We saw how Leontius was worried that the rapidity of Philip's invasion of Aetolia would take the defenders by surprise. Now his lightning-quick invasion of the Peloponnese brings the Spartans to their senses (5.18). It is entirely their focalization that dramatizes Philip's speed. Four days after leaving Corinth he marches past Sparta itself. We see the scene through Spartan eyes as, astonished, they watch the Macedonian army march past the city. The last they heard, Philip was in Aetolia destroying Thermum; they were even thinking of sending Lycurgus to Aetolia to help. "No one imagined the danger would come to them so quickly from such a distance, the king's extreme youth still tending to inspire contempt for him." The word *still* (*akmen*) is an interesting pointer to their incorrect judgment: there is a strong implication that they should not "still" be thinking anything of the sort. Indeed, with things turning out contrary to their expectations, they were dismayed and forced into a reappraisal: "for Philip had shown daring and energy beyond his years and reduced all his enemies to a state of bewilderment and helplessness." The explanatory word *for* (*gar*) indicates that this is now the Spartan assessment of the situation. By his daring and energy, they concluded, Philip had overcome his youth and left his enemies

helpless, for it had only taken him seven days to get from Aetolia to Sparta. The Spartans could not believe their eyes.

It is instructive to dwell on speed for a moment and examine its very similar presentation in relation to Hannibal's march to Italy from Spain at the beginning of the Second Punic War in 218 BC. At 3.35 Hannibal crossed the Ebro and reduced the tribes and cities to the north of it "with unexpected speed." This is Polybius' own assessment, but thereafter we see Hannibal's speed through Roman and, specifically, Scipio's eyes. First, the Romans, having heard back from the envoys they had sent to Carthage and learning that Hannibal had crossed the Ebro, decided to send Tiberius Sempronius Longus to Africa and Publius Cornelius Scipio to Spain (3.40.1–2). Scipio set off for Spain in early summer, but Hannibal was already a step ahead. While sailing along the coast of Liguria (the south of France), Scipio heard that Hannibal was crossing the Pyrenees, and so disembarked at the mouth of the Rhône, convinced that Hannibal "was still at a distance of many days' march, owing to the difficulty of the country and the numbers of Celtic tribes between them" (3.41.4–6). He assumed he had plenty of time to cut off his further advance, but it was reported to Scipio that Hannibal was already at the Rhône (3.41.8–9); he found this hard to believe because of the speed involved. The narrative then slows down, as Hannibal's crossing of the Rhône is recounted in careful detail (3.42–46), before stopping altogether to allow Polybius to discuss what other writers have said about Hannibal's crossing of the Alps (3.47–48). All this in itself helps emphasize Hannibal's speed, because even after such a long narrative delay, when Scipio himself reaches the crossing place, he finds he is three days behind Hannibal (3.49.1). He is astonished, as he was convinced that Hannibal would not choose this route into Italy, lined as it was with hostile inhabitants. He then sets sail for Italy again, planning to march rapidly through Etruria and get to the foot of the Alps before Hannibal descends. Again the narrative slows for a detailed description of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps (4.50–56). Even after the tortuous trek across the mountains, Hannibal reaches the north Italian plain and has time to let his troops recuperate before Scipio gets there. On this occasion, both commanders are astonished at each other's speed (3.61.1–6). The whole account of Hannibal's march to Italy ends where it began, with the Romans, bringing us neatly back to where we had started (3.61.7–8). They were still laboring under the same impression they had at the beginning of the episode. The last they heard, Hannibal had captured Saguntum, so they had sent off one consul to Africa and the other to Spain to fight Hannibal there; now they were astonished to hear he was in Italy itself, already besieging cities. The parallel with the Spartans thinking

that Philip was still at Thermum and planning to send Lycurgus there is striking, and it does seem to create a conscious link between Hannibal and Philip. The latter had not yet declined into tyranny: his military qualities could still convincingly be aligned with those of Hannibal. At all stages of both accounts, focalization enormously enhances the impression of speed.

We left Philip campaigning in the Peloponnese (5.17–24). In chapter 25 the scene changes back to the court. Leontius and his fellow conspirators, Megaleas and Ptolemaeus, make a last attempt to intimidate Philip by stirring up trouble among an elite corps of the Macedonian army. It is perhaps not quite a mutiny, but heading in that direction. Philip faces the soldiers down and restores order, knowing well who was responsible for the sedition, but saying nothing yet.

Leontius finally gives up and sends to Apelles for help. Apelles has been lording it in Chalcis, acting with more authority than he had, “saying that the king was still young and was ruled by him in most matters and could do nothing of his own accord” (5.26.4). As a result, the officials in Macedonia and Thessaly deferred to him and ignored the king. Again Philip was perfectly aware of what was happening, but he did not tell anyone and kept his plans secret. The reader knows he has the matter under control, but Apelles is still unaware of the truth. Relying on what Polybius specifically identifies as an incorrect assessment of his own position, he thought he would be able to arrange everything as he wanted if he could just meet with the king. Of course, we already have evidence that this will not work: it is exactly what Leontius thought and equally wrong. Arriving at Corinth with great ceremony to a generous reception by the troops, Apelles is refused access to the king, and his support begins to melt away, until he is finally left on his own.

So brief a space of time is enough to raise up and cast down again all men, and especially those in royal courts, for in truth they are exactly like counters on a counting-board. Those subject to the will of the person doing the counting are at one moment worth a penny and at the next a talent: in the same way, courtiers at the nod of the king are at one moment to be envied and at the next to be pitied. (5.26.12–13)

Megaleas realizes the writing is on the wall, as Apelles must have, too: the latter continues to be invited to banquets, but not to council meetings or into the immediate presence of the king. Philip is now completely in control. He orders the arrest of Leontius when Megaleas flees to Athens—Leontius is responsible for the bail set at twenty talents—and when the peltasts (elite troops) beg the king not to put

Leontius on trial in their absence, Philip is merely exasperated and orders the execution of Leontius earlier than he had intended (5.27). This is technically analeptic information: we have not actually been told that Philip has plans to execute Leontius, although threat is in the air, as Philip watches and keeps his counsel until he is ready to strike. When we see him observing, through his own eyes, the actions of the various conspirators, we might suspect that he has deadly intentions, but now we know. Letters then come into Philip's possession incriminating Megaleas and Apelles, and they are arrested. Both commit suicide, thus meeting the end they deserved (5.28.4–8). The last of the conspirators, Ptolemaeus, is executed shortly afterward (5.29.6).

There is one last group who have yet to recognize their mistake in underestimating Philip—the Aetolians. Sure enough, we now hear that the Aetolians want peace, as things were not turning out as they expected (5.28–29):

For while they hoped to be able to manipulate Philip like a helpless child, owing to his youth and inexperience, in fact they found him to be a grown-up man, both in his plans and in their execution. Indeed it was they themselves who were shown to be contemptible and childish both in their general policy and in their conduct of particular operations.

This neatly returns us right to the beginning of the Social War at the start of book 4 and to the beginning of the theme of Philip's youth. For it was the Aetolians who, mistakenly, as we now know, thought Philip was too young to manage and therefore started interfering in the Peloponnese, thus causing the war. The language is reversed to emphasize the Aetolian about-turn: in 4.3.3 the child (*pais*) was Philip, and the Aetolians thought they could despise him (*kataphronesantes*); now they are the childish ones (*paidariodeis*) and to be despised (*eukataphronetoi*). With the realization of their mistake, we have come full circle. The whole theme of Philip's young age was a sort of literary set-up, but one with an important historical interpretation contained in it: the perception that led the Aetolians and Spartans to think it was safe to antagonize Macedon was wrong. Philip was, in fact, never too young.

Everything has been resolved all at once: in the context of both court and warfare, Philip has triumphantly overcome his youth and, for the moment, decisively established himself as master. In depicting Philip as a young Macedonian king displaying an impressive speed of movement (even matching that of the great Hannibal), it seems highly probable that Polybius means us to compare him with Alexander the Great. Indeed, we saw how at Sparta some of Philip's advisers made

the comparison explicit, referring to Alexander's dramatically swift descent on Thebes in 335 BC, when he marched from Macedon's northern border to Thebes in fourteen days. Alexander was the "boy" par excellence. As Demosthenes scathingly (but unwisely) wrote to the Persian leaders when trying to persuade them to resist Alexander (Plutarch, *Demosthenes* 23.2), "he is just a boy and a fool." Alexander's response should have sent a shiver down Demosthenes' spine: "he would make Demosthenes see how he had grown into a youth while passing through Thessaly, and would appear as a man before the walls of Athens" (Plutarch, *Alexander* 2). In very much the same way, if Philip was ever "a boy," his enemies watched him grow into a man with the same speed he demonstrated on the battlefield. Speed, combined with youthful helplessness misidentified, is the theme Polybius has developed to portray the beginnings of Philip's reign.

Remaining problematic in this theme, however, are the two occasions when Polybius guesses about the influence of an adviser—Aratus in 4.24 and Demetrius in 5.12. These cases are partly odd because they are not really consistent with the implications of the way Philip's youth has been focalized: should the Aetolians, Spartans, and others not realize that it does not matter if the king is young, they are going to have to deal with powerful and experienced courtiers anyway? Polybius seems to be at loggerheads with everyone else here. They all think it does make a difference if the king is very young, presumably because he is the one in charge but too inexperienced to make the necessary decisions. In his own statement on the matter, Polybius pushes the idea that a young king is not really the person running the show. And yet the whole account of Philip's reign is designed to demonstrate precisely that all these views of his young age are incorrect. There is perhaps an unresolved tension here. Polybius wants to have his cake and eat it, too. When Philip makes a good decision, it must be due to Aratus; when he makes a bad one, it must be Demetrius. But this does not really fit with the rest of the literary design.

Ptolemy IV

After methodological discussion in chapters 30 to 33, we move into the structurally somewhat more complex central section of the book. "There is a suspicious structural similarity in Polybius' accounts of the early years of the three kings [Philip, Ptolemy, and Antiochus]. All three are initially subjected to the conflicting pressures of a wicked and a wise advisor," one scholar has written (Ager, 2003). Actually, the pairing of advisers in conflict is a theme that continues, certainly

through the reigns of Philip and Ptolemy; and if there are striking similarities, there are also some differences. Ptolemy's introduction (5.34–35) is very different from that of Philip, who was well established in the narrative as an independent operator before any question of court influence was raised. The first mention of Ptolemy, on the other hand, identifies him as a playboy king, completely negligent of internal affairs and foreign policy, who leaves everything up to his right-hand man, Sosibius. Given Ptolemy's neglect of government, conspiracies were formed against him—as was only to be expected (*eikotos*).

The first was that of Cleomenes (5.35–39), the Spartan king who had fled to Egypt in 222 BC after his defeat at the hands of Macedon in the Cleomenean war. He saw it was the perfect moment to return to Greece and repeatedly asked Ptolemy for assistance. The king foolishly and thoughtlessly paid no attention. We scarcely need the narratological category of repetition (telling more than once what happened once) to identify Polybius' emphasis on Ptolemy's negligence: it appears at 34.4–5, is repeated at 34.10 and 35.6, and will crop up again in 5.40.1. This is really the only thing Polybius has to report about Ptolemy. After the decisive contrast at 5.35.6–7, “on the one hand the king . . . on the other Sosibius,” Ptolemy virtually disappears from the narrative until the preparations for the Raphia campaign some thirty chapters later; and even then, he is a subsidiary figure. Sosibius is the man in charge, and he dominates the narrative as he did the court. His first hostile pairing is with Cleomenes (balancing the Aratus/Apelles contrast in Macedon). The story of Cleomenes' end proceeds, narratologically, at a slow pace: the whole story of the relationship between Nicagoras, Archidamus, and Cleomenes is recounted in great detail. This is a parallel to the details in the Macedonian court of Apelles' politicking to get his candidate elected Achaean strategos in 4.82 or of the banquet, the row, and its consequences for Leontius and Megaleas in 5.14–16. We might note the forged letter that catches Cleomenes out in the end (5.38.1–5): Sosibius persuades Nicagoras to forge a letter saying that Cleomenes was planning to revolt against the king. In the Seleucid court, Hermeias forges a letter of Achaeus to persuade Antiochus to attack him (5.42.7); Molon produces forged letters from Antiochus to encourage his army (5.43.5–6); Hermeias forges a letter again, to convict his archenemy Epigenes (5.50.11–14). Later Agathokles and Sosibius forge Ptolemy IV's will (15.25). There seems to have been a rash of forging. It was presumably easy to do. I am not suggesting that it did not happen in any particular case, but I wonder if it is not also something of a commonplace: it is what evil courtiers do.

The second conspiracy against Ptolemy is that of Theodotus,

governor of Coele-Syria, an area of dispute in the Middle East between the Seleucid and the Ptolemaic empires (5.40). His reasons were that he despised the king's debauched lifestyle and conduct and distrusted the court. He had done sterling service in protecting Coele-Syria before against Antiochus, but received no thanks, and indeed was recalled to Alexandria, where he barely escaped with his life. There is no self-contained story of a conspiracy here: Theodotus simply plotted in revenge to hand over Coele-Syria to Antiochus. His transfer to the Seleucid side is recorded (5.61–62), and Polybius mentions him subsequently when he is in action; he is really part of the military struggle between the Seleucids and Ptolemies, rather than of Ptolemaic court intrigue. His role in chapter 40 seems to be more structural—to form a bridge to Seleucid affairs. He was governor of Coele-Syria, and his plot against Ptolemy was to hand it over to Antiochus III. This brings us tidily to Seleucid history.

Antiochus III

In chapters 40 to 57, Polybius summarizes Seleucid affairs from the time of Antiochus' succession. There are close similarities with Philip's early years. Antiochus was also very young (about twenty). Just as the Aetolians precipitated the first action of Philip's reign, the Social War, because they thought he was too young, so in Antiochus' case two brothers, Molon and Alexander, who governed Media and Persia, respectively, revolted out of disdain for Antiochus' youth (5.41.1–2). Differently, however, their decision also involved the hope that Achaeus (in charge of Asia Minor) would join them and fear of the wicked courtier Hermeias, who was originally an appointee of Seleucus (just as Apelles had been of Antigonus) and was now in charge of affairs. He is easily the most wicked of these Hellenistic courtiers. He too is set off against an opponent, Epigenes. Right at the beginning, then, we have all the main ingredients of Antiochus' early reign introduced at once: what drives the narrative is the tension between Coele-Syria, Achaeus, the king, Molon and Hermeias/Epigenes.

Antiochus calls a council and tells all the courtiers to state their opinions on what to do about the revolt of Molon (5.41.6); Hermeias and Epigenes disagree fiercely. As we saw in [chapter 2](#), it is very difficult not to think of Xerxes, Mardonius, and Artabanus at the beginning of Herodotus book 7. Epigenes urges the king to campaign against Molon in person; Hermeias, enraged, pushes conquest of Coele-Syria. His motives, which Polybius cannot possibly have known, are alleged to be that he is afraid to fight against the dangerous Molon

and wants to take the field against one whom he regards as a much easier opponent, Ptolemy. He runs the show, overawes the council, and sends Xenon and Theodotus against Molon, while he works on Antiochus to seize Coele-Syria. “Only by involving the young man in wars on every side,” he reasons, “could he secure immunity from punishment for his former malpractices and freedom in the exercise of his present authority” (5.42.6). By chapter 45 Antiochus is worried by Molon’s success and wants to go against Molon himself; but Hermeias has the king entirely in his control because of his youth and holds him to the Coele-Syria campaign. Making little progress here, Antiochus then hears that Molon has defeated Hermeias’ appointee, Xenoetas, and finally abandons his expedition to go against Molon in person. There is a highly dramatized account of Xenoetas’ defeat (5.46–48), effectively focalized through his own eyes. We see his expectations, but also know that he does not fully understand the situation.

By chapter 49 we are back where we started in chapter 41, a situation highlighted by the extensive repetition not just of the sequence of events, but also of the words that had been used in chapter 41. Antiochus again calls a council for advice on what to do about Molon. Again, Epigenes speaks first, repeating his advice that Antiochus himself attack; again, Hermeias responds ferociously. It is almost an exact repetition of the first meeting. Antiochus patches up the row and this time takes Epigenes’ advice. But this is Epigenes’ undoing. Hermeias engineers his exclusion from the campaign. Antiochus does not like it, but goes along with it because he is not strong enough to resist Hermeias—“he was not his own master,” as Polybius tells us (5.50.5). Again using forged letters, Hermeias traps Epigenes and has him executed.

Antiochus now turns to the suppression of Molon. For the third time there is a council meeting to decide how best to deal with him (5.51.3). This time it is about the route to take rather than who should lead the campaign. Although the language is not repeated in the same way as the previous two councils, the situation is very similar in that a dispute arises between two courtiers, Zeuxis providing the opposition to Hermeias on this occasion. Hermeias speaks first and evidently gives the wrong advice. We see the situation through Zeuxis’ eyes; in view of what had happened to Epigenes, he is very nervous about opposing Hermeias. His unease is conveyed well by the unnecessarily detailed reasoning he gives for his opinion, when it is perfectly obvious that Hermeias has got it wrong. Zeuxis’ plan is adopted, and we move to the denouement with the defeat of Molon and death of all the plotters and their families (5.54.1–7). Hermeias had been giving the wrong advice all along, of course. Polybius has hinted this to the reader with the contrast between the reasonable and restrained

Epigenes (and then Zeuxis) and the enraged and irrational Hermeias. In addition, the repetition of the same thing happening three times reinforces the message: we keep on needing the same meeting, until finally the right decision is made. So the tension mounts; how is it all going to come right?

The end is near for Hermeias. Antiochus begins to take control. While he restores order with mildness and wisdom, Hermeias punishes the city of Seleucia ferociously (5.54.9–11). Antiochus either talks him out of it, admittedly with difficulty, or, more assertively, takes matters into his own hands. Hermeias' fine of 1,000 talents imposed on Seleucia is reduced by Antiochus to 150. In chapter 55 there is more attribution of unknowable motives to Hermeias. Antiochus wants to make dangerous moves against bordering potentates, and Hermeias comes to approve of this when Antiochus has a son, as he will then be in a position to become guardian for the son if Antiochus gets himself killed. But time has run out for him. The king's doctor, Apollophanes, begins to fear for himself and for Antiochus and suggests a plan to remove him. We are here given some information we did not have before: Antiochus tells Apollophanes that he already disliked Hermeias and was afraid of him (5.56.3). The only indication we have had so far of this is Antiochus' displeasure at the removal of Epigenes from the campaign against Molon. The plot is hatched, and at a meeting with the king, while Antiochus turns away to relieve himself, Hermeias is murdered (5.56). Antiochus is thus freed from fear and awkwardness, and everyone congratulates him on removing Hermeias.

Apollophanes briefly has influence in advising Antiochus to capture Seleucia, but we do not hear any more of him. In what survives of Polybius, it appears that advisers in Antiochus' court are hereafter conspicuous by their absence until the very end of his reign, when, judging particularly from Livy, he is surrounded by influential and bad advisers. Although it would be dangerous to draw too confident a conclusion from the fragmentary books, the independence of the king from his courtiers is perhaps reflected in an interesting passage of book 8 (8.23). When Antiochus was besieging the Armenian city of Arsamosata in 212 BC, the city's ruler, Xerxes, fled but then proposed a meeting with Antiochus. The most trustworthy of his courtiers advised the king to grab the young man, take the city, and give it to his nephew. But, says Polybius, the king paid no attention to them and did quite the opposite, reconciling his differences with Xerxes and giving him a marriage alliance. Everyone thought he had acted in a truly royal and magnanimous way.

At this point in the narrative both Antiochus and Philip have reached the same stage in their early careers. Both have met the similar challenge posed by a powerful courtier they had inherited,

both have had that courtier killed, and there are close similarities in the nature of the court intrigue described, the Aratus–Apelles opposition functioning in the story in a very similar way to that of Hermeias–Epigenes. Both kings are also young, but Polybius is less interested in Antiochus’ youthfulness, as there was no doubt that he was under the thumb of Hermeias. Although Antiochus seems to assert himself more effectively after the execution of Epigenes, his emergence as his own man is quite sudden and almost fortuitous—it is entirely Apollopheanes’ intervention that brings it about. Philip’s removal of the conspirators in the Macedonian court, on the other hand, seems to be very much his own initiative, even if he had available the advice of Aratus. And the narrative of Philip’s campaigning in the Social War introduces him to the reader in a very different manner from Antiochus. So, although the stories do indeed have many structural similarities, they are developed differently.

The similarities of Antiochus and Philip with Ptolemy IV are more superficial, as Ptolemy was (in Polybius’ opinion) not a serious king. Apart from observing that he took no effective part in politics, there is not much more Polybius can say, and he ignores him, concentrating instead on the real power in the Egyptian government, the formidable courtier Sosibius. One could also argue that the so-called plots against Ptolemy are somewhat contrived. Cleomenes can scarcely be said to conspire against him: he just wants to get back to Greece. The real plot is that of Sosibius against Cleomenes, and the two of them do not function in the narrative as a pair of courtiers in conflict, one offering the king good advice, the other bad. All assessment of the arguments for and against sending Cleomenes off to Greece with an army is made by Sosibius. Theodotus’ conspiracy is also hardly classifiable as a conspiracy: he just jumps ship to the Seleucid side, taking with him as many of the Ptolemaic possessions in Coele-Syria as he can.

The great surprise of the last part of book 5 is the victory of Ptolemy over Antiochus at the Battle of Raphia in 217 BC that brings the Fourth Syrian War to an end. The build-up to the battle is cleverly contrived. The narrative goes back and forth between the contestants. Chapters 58 to 62 are all about Antiochus. Now free of the constraints imposed by Hermeias, he stands alone and in 219 enjoys an important success in capturing the Egyptian-held city of Seleucia, the port of Antioch (5.58.61), before making his way south to accept Theodotus’ invitation to begin to take possession of Coele-Syria. The scene then shifts in chapters 62 to 65 to the Ptolemaic side; the king had so neglected the necessary preparations that he was too weak to respond to the incursion of Antiochus. Sosibius and Agathocles are the people in control, and they cleverly develop delaying tactics to hold Antiochus off, constantly playing on his perception that Ptolemy will

not fight, but will try to negotiate (5.63.2–3):

They decided to occupy themselves with preparations for war, but in the meantime by negotiations to make Antiochus relax, working together to confirm his long-standing opinion of Ptolemy; namely, that he would not dare to fight, but would try by diplomacy and through his courtiers to reason with Antiochus and persuade him to evacuate Coele-Syria.

This is a sort of double-layered or “embedded” focalization: Sosibius’ and Agathocles’ perception is that it is Antiochus’ perception that Ptolemy will not fight. Both Antiochus and his envoys are successfully lulled into a false sense of security by Sosibius, who manages to conceal Egyptian military preparations from the Seleucid ambassadors he so hospitably welcomes in Alexandria (5.66.6–9). Polybius does not actually say that Sosibius was also playing on Antiochus’ main worry, his cousin Achaeus—who had openly revolted by proclaiming himself king in Asia Minor in 220 BC (5.57.5)—but according to Polybius, Antiochus believed that Egypt was backing Achaeus. When the Egyptian ambassadors proposed a truce for four months over the winter of 219/218, Antiochus agreed, “anxious not to be kept long away from his own dominions, but to winter in Seleucia, as Achaeus was evidently plotting against him and undisguisedly acting in concert with Ptolemy” (5.66.3). Antiochus was probably right in this assessment, for during the truce negotiations, in which both sides claimed historical precedents for the ownership of Coele-Syria, the Egyptian delegation insisted that Achaeus should be included in any peace treaty. This is all a highly effective narrative of military and diplomatic activity as seen through the eyes of the participants themselves. They, of course, have only a limited field of vision, while the reader gets to see the unfolding of events through both sets of eyes.

By chapter 68 the two sides are tired of negotiation, and in 218 BC Antiochus decides on an all-out invasion of Coele-Syria. His initial successes are recorded before the scene shifts to the campaigning of Achaeus in Asia Minor (5.72–77)—a literary reflection of the way in which Antiochus needs to keep a constant eye on him—where Attalus, king of Pergamum, is also a relevant factor (5.78). Finally in chapter 79 we get back to the decision to fight, already made in chapter 68. Both sides are ready and we move to the battle of Raphia (5.84–86). Afterward, the spotlight falls briefly on Ptolemy for the first time since his introduction earlier in the book. He fails to take advantage of Antiochus’ vulnerable position (troops of dubious enthusiasm and Achaeus in his rear), overimpressed as he is with his unexpected victory. After a brief display of annoyance at Antiochus, he readily

agrees to peace, anxious to get back to his life of indolent ease. Leaving Sosibius to ratify the treaty, he tours Syria and Phoenicia and returns to Egypt (5.87).

The book then moves quickly to its end. After coverage of the earthquake in Rhodes (5.88–90) we return finally to the Social War (5.91–105). The problems with Philip's advisers are now behind us. No longer distracted by court intrigue, the narrative can deal, in more or less uninterrupted manner, with the course of the war. The speed is quite fast, not because it is not important, but because the obstacles to its smooth progression have been removed. Chapters 91 to 94 follow events in the Peloponnese, 95 to 100 in northern Greece, 100 to 105 the peace negotiations. We get, of course, the famous image of the clouds in the West for the first time. This is the moment when Mediterranean history begins to become an organic whole, to flow in one stream. The remaining six chapters provide a whirlwind tour of the people and themes Polybius has been treating, to bring all Greek history up to the battle of Cannae. The Achaeans and other Peloponnesians use the peace to reconstruct their affairs; the Athenians pursue a politically neutral policy in Greece, but bestow lavish praise on the kings, particularly Ptolemy; Ptolemy faces trouble at home—we get a proleptic statement about the Egyptians finding native leaders not long after, a subject that will be picked up in due course; Antiochus teams up with Attalus against Achaeus; the Aetolians do not like peace, but are restrained by Agelaus; Philip is stoked up by his latest svengali, Demetrius, with dreams of Italian and world conquest; and Prusias sees off the Galatians. Polybius is now going to discuss the Roman constitution in book 6, but everything is set for the resumption of the narrative in book 7.

Although there is far too much in books 4 and 5 to examine every aspect of the narrative they present—I have merely followed some of the threads of the story as it concerns the kings, and it should be said there are far more complicated cloths that narratologists could weave—my concern in this chapter has been to highlight some of the ways in which Polybius achieves his narrative. I would like to end by thinking about what our examination tells us. The question needs to be asked, so what? By looking at details of how the tale is told, at frequency, order, focalization, or other analytical tools that narratology gives us, are we just looking at Polybius the artist, at perhaps clever patterns of storytelling? Where does this sort of investigation get us? There are two answers I would emphasize.

First, causation. When we think of Polybius and causation, our thoughts probably turn first to war and the careful theoretical distinction he makes between causes, pretexts, and beginnings ([chapter 2](#)). He does stress repeatedly, however, how important it is to

discover the causes of things in general. To Polybius, time and again, perceptions are what makes things happen, not some notional “reality.” One of the major ways this is communicated (although not the only one) is through focalization, what one scholar has called the “gaze” of Polybius. Fundamental to Polybius’ method is the presentation of events through the eyes of the participants. These perceptions can themselves be manipulated by the historian’s reordering of time, for instance, or by the speed which he devises for the narrative. Polybius offers no general theory of causation, as he does of war; but it is clear on almost every page that the world works in the way it does because human beings make decisions based on their perceptions, whether right or wrong.

Second, there is an artistic point. Polybius was a writer who we know thought very carefully indeed about how he could best tell the complicated story he wanted to communicate. This is most obvious in the excellence of his overall structures. But I have tried to show that when it comes to the execution of the details, there is a subtlety of presentation that we can miss if we buy too easily into the opinion of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, distracted by Polybius’ failure to write beautiful Greek, that here was an author you could only take in small doses. We also need to remember that when it comes to literary artistry, more is at stake than mere art—we are touching on the very nature of history writing. In writing history, were the historians of antiquity doing fundamentally what modern historians do? A generation ago, classical scholars, if they thought about it at all, answered that question in the affirmative. Now most would recognize that there are substantially different attitudes between what we mean by, for instance, truth, prejudice, or invention and what they meant (see [chapter 2](#)). To what extent is literary artistry fully compatible with historical truth? It would be far beyond my brief in this book to offer answers to this big question, but I want to point out that it is this realm we enter when we engage in the literary analysis of a historian. It seems to me, however, that this is a much more positive process than just seeking to undermine a historian’s worth: the better we understand Polybius the artist, the better we understand the historian.

Further Reading

There is a very good account of the workings of Hellenistic courts in Herman (1997) and also Mooren (1998). For a political assessment of Apelles’ “conspiracy,” see Errington (1967). The standard history of Philip V of Macedon is still Walbank (1940). On the decline of the Seleucids in the second century BC, Habicht (1989) is helpful; on

Antiochus III, Ma (1999) represents new and exciting approaches to Hellenistic kingship. Bibliography on narratology is huge. The most enjoyable account, in my opinion, is Genette (1980). Bal (1997) is the most important technical description. In the field of classical studies, De Jong (1987), writing on Homer's *Iliad*, was a remarkable demonstration of the possibilities offered by narratology. Rood (2004) treats Polybius in the first volume of a narratological study of the whole of classical literature. Easily the most exciting application of narratology to Polybius is Davidson (1991).

4

The Historian as Homeric Hero

In explaining the sort of man of action a serious historian must be, Polybius cites as an exemplar Homer's great hero, Odysseus (12.27.10–11), quoting from the early lines of the poem and from book 8: he was “a man of many wiles, who wandered far and wide”; “he saw the towns of many men and got to know their mind, and in his heart suffered many grievous things on the ocean” (*Odyssey* 1.1–4); “he experienced wars of men and woeful waves” (*Odyssey* 8.183). “It seems to me,” Polybius continues, “that the dignity of history demands just such a man” (12.28.1). Leaving aside the interesting and unusual admiration of an honest historian for such a crook as Odysseus, we might surmise from this passage alone that Polybius was thinking of himself as the Homeric champion of history writing; two other pieces of evidence support the notion and suggest that he made public this harmless conceit. In 150 BC the Achaean leaders who had been interned in Italy after the defeat of Philip V of Macedon in 167, Polybius among them, were finally allowed by the senate to return to Greece, Cato, so the story went, recommending that the senate had better things to do than sit around all day debating whether Italian or Greek undertakers would be organizing the funerals of a few old Greeks (35.6):

And when a vote had been taken allowing their return, a few days later, intending to enter the senate to demand that the exiles should recover the honours they had previously enjoyed in Achaea, Polybius asked Cato's advice about this. Cato smiled and said that Polybius, like Odysseus, wanted to re-enter the cave of the Cyclops, having forgotten his cap and belt.

It is tempting to imagine that Cato was poking fun at Polybius' rather grand notion of himself as Odysseus. And Pausanias (8.30.8) notes that the statue of Polybius erected in the agora of his hometown Megalopolis bore an inscription testifying that “he had wandered over

every land and sea, and had become an ally of the Romans and had stayed their anger against the Greek nation.” The people of Megalopolis seem to have consciously echoed Homer’s description of Odysseus, happy to accept the association for their greatest literary son.

Polybius led an extraordinary life, taking part in Greek and international politics at the highest levels, mixing with and befriending the most powerful men in the world. He witnessed and was himself involved in many of the great Mediterranean events he wrote about. Unlike Thucydides, who also had an important political role, he was no retiring hero, and not only emphasized how important this experience was for the writing of history, but also wrote himself centrally into the story of Rome. In this chapter I will look briefly at the details of his life with the object of assessing how they affected what he wrote and thought.

Polybius’ Early Life and Career

A work entitled *Macrobioi*, which gives an annotated list of long-lived men and was once attributed (incorrectly) to the second-century AD writer Lucian, reports that Polybius died at the age of eighty-two, having fallen off his horse on his way back to Megalopolis from the countryside (chapter 23). This information, coupled with what seems to be a reference from Polybius himself (3.39.8) to the building in about 118 BC of the Via Domitia, the road from the Pyrenees to the River Rhône, would put his birth in about 200 BC. This is probably the most widely accepted chronology of Polybius’ life, but there is an alternative version that places the whole thing eight to ten years earlier. The details of the debate, to which there is no obviously definitive solution, need not detain us, except to say that it is not one of those chronological puzzles on which little or nothing depends. It is reported by Plutarch (*Moralia* 258 C = Polybius 21.38), for instance, that in Sardis Polybius met and was impressed by Chiomara, wife of Ortiagon the Gaul, one of the great leaders of the Galatians of Asia Minor. Ortiagon was defeated by Cn. Manlius Vulso in 189 BC, and it is sometimes assumed, without justification, that it must have been at this time that Polybius met Chiomara. If so, he could have been a young officer with the Achaean troops in the service of Manlius Vulso (21.3b) and could also be the person whose journal seems to be behind the account of Livy 38.12–17, which reads as if it was written by someone serving with Manlius. In this scenario, Polybius would have to have been born well before 200 BC. This is all, however, unsupported speculation; nothing requires it, and I proceed on the

basis of the later dating.

Polybius was born into one of the leading political families of Megalopolis, itself the leading city of the Achaean League, the confederation of Peloponnesian states that, especially under the guidance of the great Philopoemen, had become the dominant force in the affairs of southern Greece in the early years of the second century BC. He recalls being present at a conversation between Philopoemen and another top Achaean politician, Archon, in 184/183 BC (22.19), evidence probably of a highly politicized upbringing. His father, Lycortas, was a friend and colleague of Philopoemen, and when the latter died in 182, Polybius was chosen to carry his ashes at the funeral, no doubt as an acknowledgment of the friendship between the two families and his father's prominence (Plutarch, *Phil.* 21.5). A year later, scarcely twenty years old, Polybius was chosen as a member of the Achaean embassy to Ptolemy V Epiphanes (24.6). His father headed the mission and may well have used his influence to get his son selected, but it is still an impressive honor for such a young man, in no way lessened by the fact that Ptolemy died before the embassy could leave. An inscription shows Polybius at about this time employed on a commission to fix the boundary between Megalopolis and Messene. In 170/169, at the age of thirty, he was elected hipparchos (cavalry commander), second-in-command of the Achaean League (28.6.9). This was probably the first year he was eligible: his father had been strategos, chief officer of the league, several times in the 180s, and it was clear that Polybius was also heading straight for the top.

These were, however, dangerous times for the Greek states. In a series of victories that rocked the Mediterranean world, Rome defeated Hannibal in 202, Philip V of Macedon in 197, and Antiochus III of Syria in 189. Within a short space of time, the major issue facing the Achaean League had very rapidly become its policy toward the emerging superpower in the west. Allies of Macedon in the last quarter of the third century BC, and with good reason to be grateful to Philip, the members of the Achaean League abandoned him in 198 and joined Rome. The practical difficulties facing the political decision makers at the time are set out in a retrospective comparison Polybius draws between the policies of Aristaenus and Philopoemen, two of the great leaders of the league in the 190s and 180s (24.11–13). Aristaenus accepted Rome's dominant role in Greek politics and indulged—sometimes even anticipated—her wishes; he gave the appearance of abiding by the law, but in fact yielded easily to Rome's will. He was a pragmatist. When, in pursuit of your policies, he said, you had the power to aim at honor and advantage, it was right to do so; when honor was no longer attainable, you had to follow your best

interest. Philopoemen, too, accepted that in the end they would have to do what Rome said, but was ready to insist more forcefully on the laws and the terms of their alliance with Rome. They could at least object and argue their case when the Romans were threatening to ride roughshod over their rights; in this way they might diminish or postpone the effects of Roman rule. Philopoemen was well aware that there would come a time when they would have to yield complete obedience to Rome, but why not put it off as long as possible? The difference between the two policies was one of attitude rather than effect. Philopoemen refused to surrender honor without a genuine appeal to the law; Aristaeus thought it was too late for that and gave in more or less without resistance. Both were, in Polybius' opinion, "safe" policies, and protected the rights of the Achaeans, but the Romans were intolerant of anything other than complete compliance. It is interesting to note that, even thirty years after Philopoemen's death, Polybius still had to defend his reputation against charges of hostility to Rome (39.3 = Plutarch, *Philopoemen* 21).

Presumably the reason why Polybius goes back over Achaean policies in the 190s and 180s is that the same tensions applied when he found himself in a position of leadership in 170 BC. At this stage, Rome was engaged against King Perseus of Macedon in the Third Macedonian War and was extremely suspicious of any political stance taken by the other Greeks that was not openly and avowedly pro-Roman: make the wrong move and you could easily find yourself deported to Rome without legal recourse, as the Aetolian leaders Hippolochus, Lochagus, Eupolemus, and Nicander had found out (27.15.14, 28.4.6). In the context of war, this is perhaps not surprising, but Roman opinion about and treatment of the Greeks had, in Polybius' view, been hardening in the immediately preceding years. The main cause of this change, he maintained, was the rise of a new breed of Achaean politician, who advocated a policy of abject subservience and obsequiousness to Rome. The responsibility for the development of this approach, according to Polybius, and thus for the resulting disasters that befell the Greeks, lay with a man named Callicrates, for whom Polybius reserved an unswerving hostility.

Callicrates' extremist pro-Roman opinions got a crucial airing in Rome itself in 180 BC (24.8–10). In that year the Achaeans debated a communication from the senate ordering the return to Sparta of her exiles. Polybius' father, Lycortas, still believed in the fundamental reasonableness of the Romans: if you just told them that compliance with their wishes would involve breaking Achaean oaths, laws, and inscribed decisions, they would withdraw their demand. But Hyperbatus, strategos of the league in 181/180, and Callicrates argued that no law or inscription should stand in the way of doing exactly

what Rome wanted. An embassy, including Callicrates, was sent off to Rome to explain Lycortas' position. Callicrates, however, completely ignored instructions and instead lectured the senate on how they should run Greek affairs. There were two parties in the Greek states, he said: those who advocated complete and unquestioning compliance with Rome's wishes, regardless of existing laws and agreements, and those who constantly appealed to those laws to find reasons for not carrying out Rome's will. The latter group was dominant at that time; indeed, pro-Roman politicians were reviled. This state of affairs was entirely the senate's own fault. If they were happy to see the Greeks continuing to ignore Rome's instructions, they need merely carry on as before. If not, then they should support their friends in Greece and make clear their disapproval of those who would defy them: leading politicians would soon fall into line and the populace follow them out of fear.

It is a matter of debate whether Polybius was right to regard this as such a crucial turning point in Romano-Greek relations. He maintained that the senators responded decisively to Callicrates' "get tough" advice, and now for the first time looked to their own interests in promoting their supporters in Greece and humbling those who opposed them. "The consequence of this was that gradually, as time went on, they had plenty of flatterers, but very few true friends" (24.10.5). Callicrates returned to Greece armed with senatorial approval and an official statement that there should be more men like him among the Greeks, but "quite unaware that he had been the initiator of great calamities for the Achaeans." For up to this point, Polybius believed, the Achaeans had related to Rome on reasonably equal terms; Callicrates had now made that impossible. Although it is not at all obvious that the senate suddenly behaved differently toward the Greeks, it does seem to be the case that political opinion and behavior in Greece itself was increasingly polarized, and perhaps more hawkish voices made themselves heard in Rome.

In 170 BC the immediate issue facing Polybius and his colleagues was the embassy of two of the senate's toughest enforcers, Gaius Popillius Laenas and Gnaeus Octavius, sent by the consul Hostilius Mancinus to keep the Greeks on side against Macedon (28.3-7). Popillius Laenas' approach to "diplomacy" is nicely illustrated by the famous story, recounted by Polybius (29.27), of how in the summer of 168 BC he halted the invasion of Egypt by Antiochus IV of Syria. Confronting the king outside Alexandria, Popillius demanded he fall back to Syria. When Antiochus asked for time to consider the matter, Popillius drew a circle around him in the sand and told him he had to answer before leaving it. Octavius' diplomatic credentials can be gauged by the mission he led to Syria in 163, the aim of which was to

burn the Seleucid warships, hamstringing their elephants, “and by every means to cripple the royal power” (31.2.11). Clearly this was a pair of ambassadors not to be trifled with. They toured the Peloponnese trying to persuade the people of the senate’s gentleness and kindness—Argos rolled over easily enough, passing a series of measures for the honor and benefit of Octavius (Sherk 1984, n. 22)—but surely undermined their message with ill-concealed threats (28.3.4–6):

They also made clear in what they said that they knew who those people were in each city who were hanging back more than they should, as well as those who were rushing forward to help. It was evident to everyone that they were just as much displeased with the hangers-back as with those openly opposing Rome; and in consequence they created a general state of anxiety and doubt about what one should say or do to prosper in the present circumstances.

Polybius reports the rumor that Popillius was planning to accuse him, his father, and Archon of opposing the pro-Roman party and maintaining a political neutrality, not because that was their natural disposition, but because they wanted to see how things turned out and wait for the right opportunity to act. This was an assessment by no means so far off the mark, but in the event, Polybius claims, Popillius could not find a convincing pretext for such an accusation and departed without making it.

Between Lycortas and those Achaeans of generally the same political disposition, there were slight differences of policy (28.7). Lycortas did indeed advocate a strict neutrality in the war: they should neither help nor hinder either side in any way. Apollonidas and Stratius thought there should be no specific action against Rome, but those toadying to Rome should be confronted and stopped. Archon, Polybius, and others appear to have advised more of a wait-and-see approach, although it soon became clear that actually they were going to take sides with Rome. Polybius implies that this policy was behind the Achaean decision to restore honors to the pro-Roman Attalid prince, Eumenes, at the request of his brother, King Attalus II of Pergamum. The Achaeans had deprived him of these honors when he had demanded from them even greater rewards than he deserved. It was a matter of some delicacy, and Polybius skilfully steered a path between the various vested interests, carrying a proposal to restore all honors to Eumenes except those that were improper or illegal.

In more concrete fashion, Archon decided that the Achaeans should dispel all doubts about their loyalty to Rome by offering full military support to the consul, Quintus Marcius Philippus, in his invasion of Macedonia during the summer of 169 BC (28.12–13). Polybius was

dispatched to convey the offer. Finding the consul engaged in a dangerous advance, he delayed meeting him until the operation was successfully concluded, perhaps thereby improving the chances that the Achaeans would not be called on to make good their promise. Even from Polybius' own account, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Philippus was not unduly impressed by the Achaean show of loyalty—this was after all the third year of the war—and “sparing them the hardship and expense,” he politely turned down their offer. Furthermore, he subsequently landed Polybius in a most delicate diplomatic tangle: the Roman legate Appius Claudius Centho put in an official request for the Achaeans to send 5,000 troops to help him out in Epirus, but privately, Philippus told Polybius to make sure the troops were not sent. Polybius says he was not sure whether Philippus was trying to oblige the Achaeans or thwart Centho; he does not mention a third possibility, that Philippus was quite happy to compromise the Achaeans. How was Polybius to proceed? His neat legalistic solution would have pleased Philopoemen: he appealed to the senate's own decision that such requests from Roman commanders must come through the senate. Centho had not done this. The matter ended up back on Philippus' desk, and he somehow had the request shelved.

The following year, Polybius' acquiescence with Roman wishes was again on display. A request for help arrived at an Achaean assembly in Corinth from the Egyptian king, Ptolemy VI Philometor, and his brother: they were struggling to repel the invasion of their land by Antiochus IV of Syria (29.23–25). They were asking for 1,000 infantry and 200 cavalry under the command of Lycortas and Polybius. The initial reaction was very favorable: the Achaeans were willing to send their entire levy if necessary. But Callicrates opposed the idea vigorously. He said they should concentrate on helping Rome. When Polybius and Lycortas made the obvious rejoinder that Marcius Philippus had only just turned down the help they offered, Callicrates managed to have the resolution declared illegal. At a further meeting in Sicyon, the whole issue was raised again and much the same arguments presented on both sides. With Callicrates opposing at every turn, the Achaeans were finally all set to vote help for the Ptolemies. At the last minute, however, Callicrates enrolled Roman assistance: a letter arrived from Philippus asking the Achaeans to comply with Rome's policy of seeking peace between Syria and Egypt. That was the end of the matter. Polybius withdrew from the debate, and the Ptolemies failed to win Achaea's support.

Exile in Rome

Incidents like these demonstrate how difficult it was for the Greek leaders to preserve a truly independent political existence, at least in any matters that concerned Rome. Even though he is the one telling the story, however, Polybius does seem to have performed impressively in his first years of leadership. His carefully moderate position with regard to Rome clearly won support, and his oratorical skills brought the Achaean assembly with him. There can be no doubt that he was rapidly establishing a reputation as one of the most powerful Greek politicians of his day, but even if he had managed to act with great tact toward individual Romans, it was also perfectly clear that no matter how reasonable his policy, he was opposed to the uncritically gung-ho partisans of Rome like Callicrates. In the aftermath of Macedon's defeat in 168 BC, pragmatic or lukewarm Roman friends were taken to be no friends at all.

Callicrates and like-minded colleagues from the other Greek states queued up to congratulate the victors and ruthlessly exploited the situation to remove or destroy their political opponents (30.13). In Aetolia, Lyciscus ordered the execution of 550 leading men, the Roman garrison commander Aulus Baebius doing nothing to prevent the slaughter (Livy 45.28.7). This was, in Polybius' view, characteristically brutal Aetolian behavior, and mostly the Roman collaborators satisfied themselves with making lists of those to be deported to Italy. Polybius identifies three categories of anti-Roman Greek politician who attracted accusation after the war (30.6–9). There were those who were well disposed to the Macedonian king, Perseus, but remained strictly neutral; others who more positively wished Perseus success, but could not persuade their fellow citizens to support him; and finally those who brought their state into full alliance with Perseus. This last category included the Molossian leaders of Epirus, who nobly stood by their principles and died bravely. Epirus in general experienced Aemilius Paullus' worst vengeance: Polybius reports seventy towns sacked and 150,000 sold into slavery (30.15). In the second category he makes a long attack on the Rhodian leaders, Deinon and Polyaratus. They openly sided with Perseus but failed to bring the rest of Rhodes with them. Polybius' disapproval stems from the fact that although there was documentary proof of their guilt in scheming with Perseus, they refused to commit suicide and "so far destroyed their reputation for daring and initiative that they left to posterity not the slightest ground for pitying or pardoning them." Polyaratus' flight from one place to the next before he was finally hunted down and taken to Rome (and, we must assume, executed) was particularly undignified. This is a little harsh, but Polybius was probably anxious to distance the first category of politician, among which he numbered himself, from any suspicion of collusion with

Macedonia. He regarded himself as one of many who because of their inaction were accused of opportunism in their sympathy for Perseus, although they never publicly expressed such views or corresponded with him (30.7.5–8):

They were, therefore, justified in expecting a trial and judgement and in putting all their expectations to the test. For to make an end of one's life when one is not conscious of having done anything unworthy simply from fear of the threats of political opponents or the power of the conquerors is no less a sign of cowardice than to cling to life at the sacrifice of honour.

This all looks like Polybius defending himself against criticism. But if he thought it was going to help his cause, he was wrong. Not surprisingly, he found himself on Callicrates' list and was one of 1,000 Achaeans deported to Italy, along with others from all over Greece (Pausanias 7.10.7–12). An Achaean embassy sent to Rome some two years later to secure their release—one of at least five such attempts—makes clear that the deportees had not been put on trial and judged, either in Greece or Rome (30.32). The senate had no intention of returning them to Greece, and for some seventeen years Polybius' home was Rome.

Obviously some Achaeans were extremely exercised by the continuing internment of their leaders (others, no doubt, were content to benefit from the absence of political opposition), but if Polybius was bitter about this treatment, it is not expressed in direct statements in any of the surviving text. He was certainly annoyed that the Romans allowed themselves to be persuaded to keep the Achaeans in Italy by the despicable Callicrates (30.29, 32)—his anger here is directed much more against Callicrates than Rome—and his disapproval of cynically self-interested Roman policy decisions in the 160s is clear (I discuss this later in this chapter). On the whole, however, what he says about his own experience of exile in Italy is decidedly upbeat. For a start, he was allowed to live in Rome, while other detainees were packed off to provincial towns (31.23.5). He gained this privilege through the assistance of Q. Fabius Maximus and P. Cornelius Scipio, sons of the great Aemilius Paullus, who had defeated Perseus. Friendship with this family, one of the most powerful and influential in the state, in particular a sort of father–son relationship with the young Scipio, may well have been at the root of his apparent contentment. He describes in considerable detail how it came about (31.23–25), no doubt parading the relationship to boost his authority as an analyst of Roman politics. It may also have given him freedom of movement. He talks of hunting with his friend Demetrius at Mount Circeius, about eighty miles south of Rome

(31.14) and of several visits to Locri in southern Italy (12.5.1–3). The Locrians had appealed to him for help in seeking exemption from their treaty requirements to send military assistance to the Romans (the date is very probably the mid-150s, well before the detainees were allowed to return to Greece). That he was successful in assisting them shows the strength of his political influence. A personal interview with Massinissa, king of Numidia (modern Tunisia), indicates almost certainly that Polybius accompanied Scipio Aemilianus to Africa in 151/150 BC (9.25). Scipio was sent there from Spain to ask Massinissa for elephants by the consul L. Licinius Lucullus, under whom he was serving as military tribune (Appian *Ib.* 71–72, 105). Presumably Polybius went out to Spain in the entourage of Lucullus and Scipio: he seems to have personally witnessed Scipio's bravery in engaging the barbarian leader in single combat and in being the first to scale the walls of Intercatia (35.5; Livy, *Ep.* 48). Polybius' crossing of the Alps along Hannibal's route (3.48.12) is most sensibly dated as part of his return journey to Rome.

Membership in the club of the Roman elite must also have given Polybius access to the prominent visitors who poured into Rome from all over the Mediterranean, and thus to vital sources of information for his historical project. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a better place to work for a historian of his methodological standards. We should not forget the political knowledge possessed by the other Greek deportees, a thousand from Achaëa alone, but Polybius was also undoubtedly in a perfect position to pick the brains of the kings, princes, and ambassadors from every corner of the world who made their way to its new capital. Long-term visitors could be more carefully cultivated. We know, for instance (as we have seen), that he befriended the Seleucid prince Demetrius, held as a hostage at Rome despite his valid claims to the Seleucid throne. Polybius gives an exciting account of his involvement in Demetrius' escape from Rome in 162 (31.11–15). As he presents the story, he was the one who sowed the idea in Demetrius' mind, and the plotters in the story are all Greeks—including Menyllus, an ambassador from Egypt, a close friend of Polybius who enrolled him in the plan. But it is usually thought very probable that there was powerful Roman support from some quarter; direct defiance of the senate's express policy entirely at his own discretion seems uncharacteristically foolhardy of Polybius.

Return from Exile

Eventually, in 150 BC, the surviving Achaean exiles were allowed to return home (35.6). Polybius had hardly got there when his services

as an adviser were requested by the consul Manilius in Africa in 149 (36.11.1): war with Carthage was threatening. He had got as far as Corcyra when he heard that Carthage had made the concessions necessary to avoid war and concluded that he was not needed. In due course hostilities did break out, and in 147 Polybius joined his friend Scipio Aemilianus, now consul and commander of the Roman forces besieging Carthage. Probably Manilius and Scipio wanted to avail themselves of Polybius' technical expertise. We have already seen examples of his theoretical and practical military knowledge; we certainly witness him advising Scipio on a practical matter at one stage during the siege of Carthage (38.19); and we know he wrote a separate work on *Tactics*, almost certainly before he published the *Histories* (he refers to it at 9.20.4). So it seems very likely that he had established a high reputation as an expert on military affairs, perhaps already by the time he was deported to Rome. This sort of expertise need not be dependent on actual fighting experience, but there is an interesting report in the work of the great fourth century AD Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus (24.2.14–17), that Polybius personally took part in the assault on Carthage. Ammianus tells of an incident in which both Polybius (now aged over fifty) and Scipio joined thirty Roman troops in attacking a city gate in the famous “tortoise” formation (where the troops advance under cover of their shields held above their heads).

It is difficult to believe this, although, of course, impossible to disprove it. What on earth would the commander-in-chief be doing risking his life in a small operation of this sort? Polybius, as we have already seen ([chapter 1](#)), was scathing about Marcus Claudius Marcellus, consul in 208 BC, criticizing him for getting himself killed in a minor engagement, and he insisted that a general should not take part in actions that did not affect the whole army. He registers his approval precisely of one of Scipio's forebears, the young Scipio Africanus (10.13.1–5), and of Hannibal (10.33), for understanding the importance of this and taking care to protect themselves in battle from needless danger. The action described by Ammianus seems completely inconsistent with this position, at least as it applies to Scipio, but it raises the question of Polybius' own participation in battle. He himself emphasizes how vital it is for a historian to have political experience when writing about politics and military experience—and he specifies risking your life in the field—when writing about war (12.25h.5). If we give any credit at all to the story in Ammianus, could it be that Polybius was conscious of having had relatively little exposure to the dangers of the battlefield and availed himself of the opportunity on offer at Carthage? On what other occasions did he get a chance to fight?

Probably the first opportunity, taking into account his age, was the revolt of Messene from the Achaean League in 183 BC (Livy 39.48.5). His coverage of the affair does not survive, just a reference to the surrender of Messene after the fighting (23.16.1), to the interference of Q. Marcius Philippus before it (24.9.12), and to the capture and execution of Philopoemen by the Messenians during it (23.12). So we have nothing to go on, except Polybius' age, seventeen or eighteen or thereabouts, when we might reasonably expect a young aristocrat from a leading family to be gaining his first experience of war. Perhaps his involvement in the commission that subsequently fixed the frontier between Megalopolis and Messene reflects a continuation of his service in the war. Of course, as we have already seen, if you accept a much earlier date of birth for Polybius, he could have taken part in Manlius Vulso's campaign against the Galatians in 189 and, indeed, in various acts of Achaean military aggression in the Peloponnese in that period. But after the revolt of Messene, there is no other report of military activity by the Achaean League before Polybius' entry into a leadership role in 170. It has to be said, however, that we know very little about what was happening in Achaia in the 170s. No doubt Polybius was learning the art of soldiering, and the skills needed by generals, but we know of very little opportunity for him to have become an experienced warrior.

The only other possibility for battlefield experience before his departure for exile in Rome occurred at the time he was delegated to report Achaia's offer of military assistance to Q. Marcius Philippus in 169. Polybius reports how he delayed formal communication with Philippus, as he was in the middle of a critical advance, but "shared in the dangers (or battles) during the invasion of Macedonia" (23.13.2). This is a curiously vague statement. It is not at all obvious what he means, other than being with a Roman army that was in a dangerous position. When the Achaean offer was made and Philippus turned it down, the rest of the Achaean delegation returned home, but Polybius stayed "and took part in the enterprise," evidently as an adviser to Philippus. This may well have given him a chance to make battlefield notes.

Whether he actually took part in the fighting at Carthage or not, his presence there observing Scipio's generalship and the Roman capture of the city must have constituted a very considerable addition to Polybius' military experience and knowledge. The most famous incident he records from the siege describes Scipio's tears over the burning city, the great Roman general "realizing that all cities, nations and authorities must, like men, meet their fate," and admitting to Polybius that this included Rome (Appian *Lib.* 132). This introduces the important matter of Polybius' views about Roman decline, to

which we will return.

Probably after the fall of Carthage, Scipio gave Polybius use of a ship to explore the coast of Africa and journey beyond the Straits of Gibraltar (3.59.7–8, 34.15.7 = Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 5.9). This voyage may have sparked or reinforced his Odyssean aspirations, and it almost certainly gave him the confidence to engage in fierce polemic against one of the most remarkable explorers of the ancient world, the fourth-century BC Pytheas of Marseilles (34.5–7). We know of Pytheas almost exclusively from the comments of other writers, as his own work, *On the Ocean*, describing his travels in northern Europe, does not survive. This is a great shame, because he was the first Mediterranean sailor we know to have circumnavigated Britain and visited the amber coasts of the North Sea and Baltic, even perhaps getting as far as Iceland. This is territory where Polybius claims particular expertise. Early on in the work (3.57) he explains why up to this point he has not said more about “the mouth of the Mediterranean at the Pillars of Heracles, or about the Outer Sea and its peculiarities, or about the British Isles and the method of obtaining tin, and the gold and silver mines in Spain itself, all matters about which authors dispute with each other at great length.” He was saving details of this sort of topic for special treatment (book 34). When he gets there, clearly one of the obstacles to the establishment of his authority was the earlier work of Pytheas. According to the great geographer Strabo, Polybius dismissed as misleading Pytheas’ claim to have traversed the whole of Britain and the whole north coast of Europe as far as the ends of the world, on the grounds that “it was in itself incredible that a private individual, and a poor one at that, should have travelled such vast distances by ship or on foot” (34.5). Pytheas’ voyages were, of course, exactly the sort of on-the-spot research Polybius required of the historian, so admitting that they actually took place was too large a concession, even if he could try to refute individual points: the only way to undermine them was to label them fabrications (34.10.6–7). Scipio reported to Polybius that had asked various people in Marseilles, Narbonne, and Corbilo about Britain, but they had nothing to tell him. Polybius’ conclusion is that Pytheas could only have been lying brazenly. In addition, it is usually thought that Pytheas was a merchant, and from an aristocratic height Polybius seems to have looked down his nose at merchants—they told lies and sensational tales (4.42.7). Just as Timaeus had to yield to Polybius the place of honor as the first proper historian of Rome, so Pytheas’ claims to have explored the far west are brutally demolished.

Perhaps the greatest advantage to Polybius of being in the company of Scipio at Carthage was that he did not have to witness or take any part in the disastrous war of the Achaean League against Rome in 146

BC. Rome's victory was swift, Corinth was sacked, and the league was disbanded. Given the previous Achaean support of Rome (however pragmatic), the conflict was an extraordinary affair, difficult to understand. Scholars still disagree about what happened and why. Polybius' account of the build-up to the war is lost, along with the rest of book 37, but it is clear he blamed the demagogic Achaean politicians, Diaeus and Critolaus (38.10.8–10), about whom we know nothing before their sudden prominence at this time:

Diaeus and Critolaus and all who shared their view—these were, so to speak, a cross-section from each city of the worst men, god-forsaken destroyers of the nation—not only, as the proverb has it, took with the left hand what the Romans gave with the right [i.e., accepted in bad faith what was offered in good], but laboured under a complete misconception. For they assumed that the Romans, owing to their campaigns in Africa and Spain, were afraid of war with the Achaeans and so would put up with anything and say anything.

It was the inexperience and wickedness of these leaders that brought the nation to ruin. Critolaus, taking advantage of a mob that had gone mad, “persuaded the Achaeans to vote for war, nominally against Sparta, but really against Rome . . . Having carried through these measures, he set himself to intrigue against and attack the Romans, not listening to reason, but forming projects which outraged the laws of gods and men” (38.13.6–8). Especially with his firsthand knowledge of Roman power, Polybius knew that this was a suicidal course of action.

If he could do nothing to prevent the madness, he could certainly try to pick up the pieces afterward. Fortunately, Polybius thought, the speed of Rome's victory prevented the complete destruction of Greece, “an ingenious and resourceful fortune counteracting the folly and insanity of the leading politicians . . . Everyone kept repeating the proverb, ‘if we had not perished so quickly we would not have been saved’” (38.18.8, 12). He performed sterling service in protecting Philopoemen's reputation and preventing the looting of statues of him, Aratus, and Achaeus—for which a grateful people erected a statue of Polybius himself (39.3)—but his main contribution was political. The details of the Roman settlement after the war are disputed. Pausanias, a second-century AD writer, provides the most important evidence (7.16.9–10), but is usually thought to be unreliable. He says that all Greek leagues were disbanded, which seems highly probable, and government by the landed aristocracy imposed. The details need not concern us, but clearly there were constitutional measures implemented, as the senatorial commission sent out to organize Greek

affairs appointed Polybius “to visit the cities and explain any matters about which the people were doubtful, until they grew accustomed to the constitution and laws” (39.5.2). According to him (with additions by a posthumous editor, revealed by a reference to the honors paid by the Greek cities to Polybius “both during his lifetime and after his death”), he succeeded in ensuring that the imposed constitution was accepted, and in seeing “that no difficulty on any subject arose either in public or private because of the laws.” It seems to be the case that he did more than just explain and reconcile the Greeks to the laws Rome drew up for them: he talks of drafting laws himself concerning public jurisdiction, without which “all would have remained undecided and in the utmost confusion.” This involvement in the resettlement of Greece he regarded as his most brilliant achievement, one rewarded, according to Pausanias, by the erection of statues of Polybius in many of the main cities of the Peloponnese.

We know almost nothing about the rest of Polybius’ life. He was in Rome again in 145/144 securing the best deal he could for the Achaeans (39.8.1). Cicero (*On the Republic* 1.34) reports discussions between Scipio, Polybius, and the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, so perhaps he was a regular visitor to Rome. At one stage he was in Alexandria (34.14). It is often suggested that he was with Scipio Aemilianus at the siege of Numantia in Spain in 134/133 (when Scipio was consul for the second time), on the grounds that he did, we know, write a separate study of the Numantine war (it is referred to by Cicero). But this is a guess. Although it is keenly debated at what date he wrote different parts of the *Histories*, he seems to have continued working on it right up to his last years (we have already seen for instance, the reference to the Via Domitia, built in 118). Given what he thought about the requirements for writing serious history, it seems unlikely that he did nothing more than sit at home in Megalopolis writing. His death at the age of eighty-two from falling off a horse, although a story recorded by a not very reliable source, is an attractively fitting end for a man whose energy and enthusiasm for life is evident on every page he wrote.

Decline and Fall

Polybius lived a long and eventful life full of drama, high promise and hopes dashed, but also of personal triumph in national adversity. It was a life lived in times that saw massive change in the Greek and wider Mediterranean world. What did he make of all this? Much has been written about whether he was an optimist or a pessimist, whether he admired or disapproved of Rome, whether by the time of

his finishing date he thought it was already in decline or not. The whole purpose of changing the plan of his work was to give the reader an opportunity to judge Roman rule once it had been established with victory over Macedon in 168 BC, so it is legitimate to examine his opinions on the matter.

To do so, however, is by no means a straightforward matter for two obvious reasons. First, we have already noted how uncertain the interpretation of the fragmentary books can be, even one as extensively preserved as book 12: there is always the fear that we are missing something crucial. Second, it is almost unthinkable that Polybius' opinions, developed over such a long period and in the face of so many personal, national, and international changes, remained the same throughout his life. If we knew the chronology of the composition of the work, we could safely track such developments in his thought. We do not know this, and complicating our ignorance, we can see that he revised parts of the work at different times. The most important revision is the change of plan announced in book 3. Obviously this was written after 146 BC and inserted into a revised introduction to book 3, which thus has at least two very different chronological layers. But how much had he already written by 146? How much, if any, had he written by the time he was exiled to Rome? Many varied and often highly speculative answers to these questions have been suggested, which I do not intend to examine. Sensible conclusions can be drawn from specific passages—for instance, Carthage is referred to as still in existence in a number of places up to book 15, which seems to me a reasonably secure indication that he had got about that far by 146. But my point is that a work of such different compositional layers makes it difficult to trace a coherent development in Polybius' opinions and perhaps warns us not to expect complete consistency.

As we will see in the final chapter, part of Polybius' analysis of the Roman state in book 6 includes a theoretical discussion of the cyclical process that sees one form of constitution give way to another and of the closely allied biological process that dictates the way in which all things have their birth, acme, and decline. Understanding how this works will enable one to identify

the formation, growth and acme of the Roman state and likewise of its inevitable change for the worse. For, as I said, Rome more than any other state, has been formed and has grown naturally, and will undergo a natural decline and natural change to its contrary. The reader will be able to judge the truth of this from what will be said below. (6.9.12–14)

In the last sentence of this citation, Polybius is referring to how the

rest of book 6 (rather than the rest of the work) will demonstrate the truth of this theory about rise and fall. But is it just theory? When considering the defeat of King Perseus and destruction of the Macedonian monarchy in 167 BC, Polybius recalls how impressed he was by the prophecy of Demetrius of Phalerum about the inevitability of Macedon's demise (29.21). This was made only a century and a half before the event, so evidently empires could fall with dramatic speed. Rome would inevitably go the same way in due course, but when? In view of his explicit statement that the Roman constitution was at its peak during the war against Hannibal (6.11.1), can we conclude that Polybius thought it went into decline thereafter and that the rest of the work documents this decline?

Greek Decline

Before we examine that matter, let us look first at the Greeks. From the point of view of a Greek aristocrat and politician, concerned with the welfare of Achaea, Greece, and the Greek world, the whole story that Polybius tells can only have been a depressing one: he may have been excited and impressed by the extraordinary drama of Rome's rise to power, but it came at the expense of his homeland. The Greeks failed utterly to counter the threat of Rome, and by 167 BC Roman dominion was established. The bottom line was that all peoples of the Mediterranean had to do what Rome told them. Any lingering ambitions for real power and autonomy held by the Greeks were shown to be mere wishful thinking by the events of 146 BC.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, given this complete failure of the Greeks, that Polybius has very little positive to say about the various states of the Greek world. As we saw in chapters 1 and 3, kings and courtiers in Polybius' *Histories* are generally depicted in various shades of wickedness. There are rare exceptions—Massinissa of Numidia, Hiero of Syracuse, Attalus I of Pergamum, for instance—but they are far outnumbered by incompetents, weaklings, drunks, and scheming, corrupt courtiers.

Of the major Hellenistic kingdoms, Egypt was probably the least effective. Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–204 BC), whom we observed as too distracted by drink and sex to pay any attention to government, displayed no redeeming features at all. Even if he did defeat Antiochus III at the battle of Raphia in 217 BC—much to the surprise of the Egyptian people, who knew his preferred lifestyle—he soon went back to his old ways (5.87). No very extensive coverage of Ptolemy V Epiphanes (204–180) survives. He was admired for his hunting skills (22.3.7–9), which would surely have gained him credit in Polybius'

eyes, and he took trouble to have the treaty between Egypt and the Achaeans renewed (22.9). So at least he seems to have been a serious monarch. An obituary notice (39.7) records a favorable judgment of Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145 BC): he was a good man and kind, unusually clement toward his brother and courtiers, “but in times of good fortune and success his mind grew relaxed and weakened, and he suffered from a sort of Egyptian waste of energy and indolence” (39.7.7). This is well illustrated by the incident in which his eunuch, Eulaeus, persuaded him to collect all his money, abandon Egypt, and head for Samothrace (28.21). Polybius thinks this was the cowardly decision of an effeminate and corrupt mind, but he blames the eunuch’s influence rather than Philometor’s natural character, which on other occasions was that of a brave man. Polybius may have enjoyed a particular family link with Egypt—we recall his place on the embassy to Alexandria in 181/180 BC, the request of the brothers Ptolemy VI and VIII for Achaean assistance specifically under the leadership of Polybius and his father, and the friendship with Egyptian courtier Menyllus—but none of this prevented him from recognizing the fundamental weakness of the Ptolemaic monarchy. He knew, for instance, that Rome’s only fear of Egypt was that it might eventually find a competent ruler (31.10.8–9)—obviously it had not done so up to this point—and when he visited Alexandria in later life, he was disgusted by the rough and ignorant mercenary population there, who “owing to the weakness of the kings had learned rather to rule than to be ruled” (34.14.3).

As we saw in [chapter 3](#), Polybius’ treatment in book 5 of Antiochus III’s early reign hardly depicts the Seleucid monarchy any more favorably. The kingdom was riven by revolt and the court dominated by intrigue. In contrast to Egypt, however, Antiochus eventually engineered the assassination of the wicked Hermeias, and in the fragmentary books appears to have become much more assertive. In 208 BC he personally fought brilliantly against the Bactrians, gaining a wide reputation for bravery (10.49); his eastern campaigns were a triumph (11.39.14–16):

Such was the final result of Antiochus’ expedition into the interior, an expedition by which he not only brought the upper satraps under his rule, but also the maritime cities and the princes this side of the Taurus mountains. In a word he safely secured his kingdom, overawing all his subjects by his courage and industry. It was this expedition, in fact, which made him appear worthy of his throne not only to the inhabitants of Asia, but also to those of Europe.

None of this could quite compensate for the defeat at the hands of

Rome that inevitably colored any final assessment of Antiochus' reign (15.37): "King Antiochus seems to have been at first a man who both conceived great projects and possessed the courage and capability of executing his designs, but as he advanced in life he showed himself much inferior to his former self and disappointed general expectation." Also lurking behind Polybius' doubts about him lies the shameful pact he made with Philip V to divide up Egypt between them, weakened as it was by the rule of the child king Ptolemy V (15.20). Polybius was outraged by their unscrupulous brutality: "who can look into this agreement as into a mirror without fancying that he sees reflected in it the image of all impiety towards the gods and all savagery against men, as well as of the unbounded covetousness of these two kings?" The tone of moral indignation is matched only by the equal degree of pleasure Polybius has in recording how Fate punished Antiochus and Philip for their conduct by raising up Rome to defeat them.

Although Antiochus received close attention in the narrative of the war against Rome, little of Polybius' editorial judgment about him survives. He could certainly talk big—when in 196 BC the Romans ordered him in peremptory fashion to keep his hands off the autonomous cities of Asia (18.47), Antiochus replied that "it was not proper for them to receive their liberty by order of the Romans, but by his own gracious favour" (18.57)—but there is a lingering suspicion that Polybius deemed him not really up to the job. Although he had taken on two mighty tasks, the liberation of Greece and war against Rome, he still found time in 191, with war raging, to fall in love with and marry a girl from Chalcis (20.8.1–5). He was, Polybius says, a keen wine drinker and liked getting drunk—a serious mark against him—and after celebrating his wedding at Chalcis, "he spent the whole winter there not giving a moment's thought to the situation of affairs." And after his defeat, he went running off to Ephesus with his bride. Other sources indicate that the accusation of a debauched winter in Chalcis is quite incorrect, but Polybius' disapproval is manifest.

Of Antiochus III's successor, Seleucus IV (197–175 BC), we hear very little, but interesting passages survive about the younger brother who succeeded him, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BC). It is a mixed and ambiguous assessment. At one level, "King Antiochus was both energetic, daring in design, and worthy of the royal dignity (except with regard to his Pelusium campaign)" (28.18; the Pelusium campaign was the one brought to an end by the intervention of Popillius Laenas). So, like his father, Antiochus III, he treacherously attacked Egypt, abandoning all he had agreed with Ptolemy VI (29.26). This reminds Polybius of what the poet Simonides said, "it is

hard to be good.” It is easy to think about being good, and to act honorably up to a certain point, but consistently to regard nothing as more important than justice and honor is difficult. Keeping your word ranked high in Polybius’ scale of values. It is interesting to observe his protective attitude toward Egypt. This may have come unconsciously from his family connections, but it is also clear that he did not think it was in the best interests of the Greek kingdoms to be trying to conquer each other.

The main problem with Antiochus IV, in Polybius’ view, was his extreme eccentricity, bordering on madness. Indeed Polybius played on his real title, Epiphanes (“the one with the manifest power”), by calling him Epimanes (“the mad one”). This was suggested by his strange, most unregal behavior (26.1.1–14;1a). He would wander around Antioch informally dressed, with only a friend or two in attendance, stop to talk or have a drink with ordinary people, and bathe in the public baths. He would join in musical entertainments, embarrassing the guests. He seems to have campaigned for election to Roman magistracies, the aedileship and tribunate, either in reality introducing these offices to Antioch or else playing some sort of elaborate constitutional game. “In consequence all respectable men were entirely puzzled about him, some looking on him as a plain, simple man, and others as a madman” (26.1.7). His odd behavior was again in evidence during the elaborate games he put on at Daphne, near Antioch, in 166 BC (30.25–26). He personally organized the sumptuous bathing and dining that followed the games themselves, but behaved so bizarrely—acting as an attendant, manically moving from one table to another, and finally dancing and performing with the mime actors—that the guests were embarrassed and left. If this seems relatively harmless, Polybius cannot resist a moral criticism: this lavish display was paid for “by the robberies he had committed in Egypt . . . He had also sacrilegiously despoiled many of the temples” (30.26.9). On his death, the question of madness was again raised (31.9): foiled in his attempt to attack the sanctuary of Artemis at Elymais, he died at Tabae in Persia, “smitten with madness, some people would say, owing to certain manifestations of divine displeasure when he was attempting this outrage on the above sanctuary.”

At no stage in the surviving passages does Polybius say what he was actually expecting from the Hellenistic monarchies with regard to their policy toward Rome. They should, of course, maintain the highest standards of regal behavior and carry out their duty to protect, lead, and promote the welfare of their people. That goes without saying, but these were very general qualities that any king in any situation should display. What, specifically, were they to do about

Rome? Was there, in fact, any way they could have withstood the Roman advance? Perhaps if we had the full text of Polybius we might be able to answer these questions; without it we can only get a sense that he expected more from the great kings, that they should have led the Greeks in devising a *modus vivendi* with Rome.

With no prospect of leadership from the Ptolemies or Seleucids, Polybius' main source of hope for the Hellenistic monarchies must have been Macedon. But here the encouraging possibilities offered by the brilliant potential of Philip V were never realized; as we saw in [chapter 3](#), that naturally talented king turned into a savage tyrant. Polybius was fascinated by his flawed and complex character. Philip committed atrocities against the Greeks; he had, according to Alexander the Isian (18.3.1–12), departed from the honorable war-making ways of the former Macedonian kings; and of course, he shared in Antiochus IV's disgrace for plotting to divide up Egypt. But he also retained many good qualities: he was brave (judging from Livy 31.24.11–17, which is derived from Polybius), loyal to his friends (18.33.1–3), moderate, and determined in adversity (25.3.9–10). Like Antiochus III, however, he failed the ultimate test of his ability: he could not match the power of Rome. Polybius thinks that his expansionist plans were a mistake: he was too easily persuaded by Demetrius of Pharos to aim at world conquest, the first step to which was the defeat of Rome (5.101–2). Thus with the famous conference called at Naupactus, and Macedon now pursuing a “Roman” policy, Mediterranean affairs began to flow in one stream. Philip may have lacked judgment in regard to Rome, but Polybius does not say what he should have done instead.

Philip's son, Perseus, began his reign in encouragingly positive fashion (25.3.3–8):

In Macedonia itself he relieved all who were in debt to the crown, and released those who had been imprisoned for offences against the crown. By this action he raised the expectation of many people, as it seemed to show that for the whole of Greece high hopes might be placed in him. He also showed in the rest of his behaviour true royal dignity. For he had a capable look about him, and was expert in all kinds of bodily exercise which are of real practical service. In his demeanour too he had a gravity and composure not unsuited to his years. He also avoided his father's incontinence in the matter of women and drink, and not only was he moderate himself in his drinking at table, but so were the courtiers who dined with him. Such was the character of the reign of Perseus at its beginning.

Yet again, initial hopes were raised only to be dashed. The war

Perseus undertook against Rome (the Third Macedonian War, 171–168 BC) was not his fault—the real cause is laid very firmly at the feet of Philip (22.18)—but his conduct of it was completely inadequate. His failure to provide funding for Genthius of Illyria, for instance, was a terrible mistake (28.9). So, too, Polybius criticizes him fiercely for his foolishness in not paying Eumenes of Pergamum (29.7–9). Probably his main shortcoming was cowardice. When it came to the decisive battle at Pydna, Perseus had been determined to conquer or die in the attempt; in the event, his courage failed him and he fled the battlefield (29.17–18).

If the kings could not offer effective leadership, it was hardly likely that the lesser states and leagues would be in a position to do so. And on the whole they present a sorry spectacle of decadence and decline. A few examples will suffice. Boeotian society was in a terminal tailspin: it had become so enervated that “for nearly twenty-five years justice, both civil and criminal, had ceased to be administered there, the magistrates . . . always contriving to abolish legal proceedings” (20.6.1). The Boeotians had even developed some form of social security for the poor (leading to demagoguery), and childless men were bequeathing their estates to support dining clubs. The people of Cynaetha in Arcadia had descended into savagery as a result of abandoning their musical culture (see [chapter 1](#)). Bribery and corruption were prevalent in Greece even at the beginning of the second century BC (18.34.7), and greed was widespread. The most avaricious of all were the Cretans: their extreme lust for wealth led them into public and private disagreements, murder, and civil war (6.46.3). Greed, pretentiousness, and laziness had so affected the Greeks in general that they did not want to marry, and thus there had been a drastic decline in the population (36.17.7). When talking of Philip V’s treachery, Polybius refers to the view held by some people that such behavior was necessary in politics, “given the present prevalence of treachery” (13.3.1); he goes on to bemoan the abandonment of the honorable waging of war, the way the men of old used to do. These thoughts, he says, were “occasioned by the excessive prevalence among our present leaders of a keenness for dishonest dealing in the conduct both of politics and of war.” The Greek towns of southern Italy were a byword for extreme wealth, but it came at a price. The people of Capua, for instance, developed such luxurious and extravagant ways that they were unable to support the burden of their wealth in the Second Punic War and called in Hannibal—bringing a punishment from Rome that ruined them (7.1). Wealth also corrupted Tarentum: the pride their prosperity engendered led them to invite Pyrrhus as their champion, only to discover that their new master was worse than what they had before (8.24).

Polybius started his work with great admiration and high hopes for the Achaean League (2.37.7–2.44). In his day it had seen “a remarkable growth of power and political union,” managing to turn the whole Peloponnese into what was virtually a single city-state. The reason for its success was that “one could not find a political system and principle so favourable to equality and freedom of speech, in a word so genuinely democratic” (2.38.5–6). In addition, the Achaeans acted with a selfless refusal to seek personal gain and a determination only to secure the freedom of all and the unity of the Peloponnese (2.42.6). Under the leadership of Aratus, Philopoemen, and Lycortas, the league flourished as never before. As we have seen, Polybius argued that it was the new generation of pro-Roman Achaean politician, particularly Callicrates, that brought the beginning of troubles, and the radical demagoguery promoted by Diaeus and Critolaus that led to the suicidal madness of war with Rome. After the defeat of Macedon in 167, presumably the best and brightest of the Achaeans of Polybius’ generation were all in exile in Italy and could hardly be held responsible for the war of 146, by which time most of them were dead. What the fragmentary nature of the text will not allow us to assess is whether Polybius made any attempt to address the failure of leadership that allowed Callicrates and his type to dominate Achaean politics. Should it not have been possible to guide the league into better ways? Perhaps in the face of Rome’s irresistible advance, they were all fighting a lost cause.

Roman Decline?

Early in book 6 (6.9.12-14), as we observed, Polybius postulated theoretically that in the natural order of things Rome will inevitably go into decline. Although we have seen how he maintains that the Roman constitution was at its most excellent during the war against Hannibal, there were signs of decay even before that. The most obvious example is the legislation in 232 BC of the tribune Gaius Flaminius, which allowed the distribution to individuals of land in northern Italy (2.21.7–9). Polybius comments, “Gaius Flaminius introduced this demagoguery and policy, which, as I’m afraid must be admitted, was for the Romans the origin of the people’s change for the worse, and the cause of the war with the Gauls that followed.” There is no time scale attached to this statement, and there is no necessary inconsistency with Polybius’ admiration for Rome’s government during the Second Punic War—Flaminius’ legislation was merely a symptom of future problems—but the implication is absolutely clear that Polybius himself must have witnessed the decline he talks of—

otherwise he could not have known that it had actually occurred.

Also interesting in this connection is Polybius' somewhat hesitant statement about Roman financial probity at the beginning of the second century BC (18.34–35). After the defeat of Philip V in 197 at the battle of Cynoscephalae, the Roman commander Titus Quinctius Flaminius treated Philip with courtesy and restraint, and the Aetolians assumed that Flaminius must have received a handsome bribe. Bribery was already common in Greece, indeed, standard behavior among the Aetolians, who were ignorant of Roman principles in the matter. Polybius continues (18.35.1–2):

If I were dealing with earlier times, I would have confidently asserted about all Romans in general that not one of them would do such a thing. I speak of the years before they undertook overseas wars and during which they preserved their own particular customs and laws. At the present time, however, I could not undertake to say this about all of them, although I could with perfect confidence say of many individuals in Rome that they are capable of maintaining their good faith in this matter.

He then cites the financial integrity of Lucius Aemilius Paullus and Publius Scipio Aemilianus as examples of honorable individuals. But the incorruptibility of Rome is no longer unqualified. One hundred years earlier Polybius would have had no hesitation in dismissing outright any accusation of bribery, but the acquisition of empire seems to have begun a process of corruption.

At the end of book 6 (6.57), Polybius outlines the process by which a state that has weathered many perils to achieve “supremacy and uncontested sovereignty” will experience decline. Wealth will lead to extravagance and excessive rivalry for office. The people, responding to this competition for power, will come to resent greedy politicians seeking their vote and will eventually refuse to follow their leaders. Mob rule will result. It is impossible to think that Polybius is still talking theoretically here: he is obviously describing at least something of the situation he had seen at Rome in the years after the defeat of Macedon in 168. It is very difficult, however, to estimate how far he thinks the process has advanced. For once he is outside the theoretical territory of book 6, he rarely relates the details of history to the theories there enunciated.

Polybius was quite prepared, for instance, to criticize individual Romans and Roman policy. Without specific statements to guide us, however, we cannot really tell at any given point in the narrative whether he was demonstrating Rome's decline, and what stage it had reached, or was just castigating a particular fault that had no wider

significance. In 168/167, for instance, the senate, annoyed with Eumenes II of Pergamum for what they perceived to be his disloyalty during the Third Macedonian War, in an attempt to win over his brother, Attalus, promised to hand over to Pergamum the towns of Aenus and Maroneia—a promise they broke as soon as they saw that Attalus had decided not to abandon his brother (30.1–3). The following year Prusias II of Bithynia behaved with revolting servility (in Polybius' view) toward the senate, “and as he showed himself to be utterly contemptible, he received a kind answer for this very reason” (30.18). In 158 King Ariarathes V of Cappadocia arrived in Rome opposed by two of his enemies, Timotheus and Diogenes. As they made no attempt at all to tell the truth, “falsehood prevailed without a fight,” and they were able to establish an advantage (32.10). In 153, sober-minded senators, having listened to the Seleucid ambassador, Heracleides, “understood the artful construction of his plot, and were frankly disgusted with him,” but the majority were seduced by his charlatanry and persuaded to pass a decree in favor of the pretender Alexander Balas (33.18.6–14).

It is evident in cases like these that Polybius thought the Romans should have acted differently, but it is not immediately clear that he thinks these incidents fit into a pattern of decline. If in his commentary, he had added that this sort of thing would not have happened in the past, we would have a better idea of their status. For there is a strong connection in Polybius between the abandonment of past policies and imperial decline. Even during the war against Hannibal, a time when the Roman system was seen at its very best, decisions were made that could be interpreted as signs of decline. As we saw in [chapter 1](#), for instance, there is a most interesting discussion of the Roman plundering of Syracuse after its capture in 211 BC (9.10). The Romans stripped the city of all its art and ornaments and carted them back to Rome. Polybius makes a convincing case that this was a mistake. If they had become great, he argues, by doing this sort of thing, then it would have been right to continue to do so.

But if, on the contrary, while leading the simplest of lives, very far removed from all such superfluous magnificence, they were constantly victorious over those who possessed the greatest number and finest examples of such works, how can we fail to believe that they made a mistake? To abandon the ways of the victors and to imitate those of the conquered, not only appropriating the objects, but at the same time attracting the envy which is inseparable from their possession—and this is the thing most feared by the powerful—is surely an incontestable

When you behave in this way you attract not only envy but hatred, too. It would have been understandable for Rome to take all the gold and silver—those aiming at empire must strengthen themselves and weaken others—but they could have left everything else and adorned Rome “not with paintings and reliefs, but with dignity and magnanimity.” Anyone else succeeding to empire should take note that the misfortunes of others are not an ornament to themselves.

This is a stinging rebuke, but Polybius does not seem to connect the episode with Roman decline in the moralizing way that first-century BC Roman commentators, admittedly writing at a time when the Republic was crashing down around them, looked back to Rome’s plundering of eastern wealth as the beginning of their decline. The historian Sallust, for instance, maintains (unconvincingly) that Roman soldiers first got a taste for wine, women, and art treasures when stationed in Asia, their new interests seriously diminishing their warlike spirit (*Catiline* 11). At this point he is referring to Sulla’s troops at the time of the First Mithradatic War (89–85 BC), but in the previous chapter, like other analysts, he dated the beginning of Rome’s slide into moral decadence and disorder to the second century BC; it was after the fall of Carthage in 146 that fortune turned unkind and confounded all Rome’s enterprises (*Catiline* 10). Polybius displays much the same disapproval of Roman actions at Syracuse, but he does not on this occasion draw quite the same conclusion that such behavior was a corrupting influence. For him the mistake lay in failing to pursue the same policies in maintaining empire as had been used to acquire it. The logic was obvious: if you change a winning formula, you cannot expect a continuation of the success it brought you. The problem with such a change of direction was a practical one—it turned people against you and thus undermined the strength of your own position—but it also had a moral dimension inasmuch as the decision to reverse policy usually resulted from an inability of people to control themselves. This was something the Carthaginian commanders in Spain failed to appreciate when, “having mastered the enemy, they proved unable to master themselves” (9.11.1) and started to behave tyrannically toward the inhabitants (10.36.4–5): “For they supposed that there is one way of acquiring power and another for maintaining it: they did not understand that the people who are best at preserving their supremacy are those who adhere to the same principles by which they originally established it.”

The same applied to Philip V of Macedon. He was the darling of all Greece and hugely successful, as long as he followed policies beneficial to everyone. But after his treacherous attack on Messene, he

completely reversed the policies that had brought him success, and consequently, as was only natural, he met with hostility and failure (7.11.8–9). Even before Messene, the same trend was in evidence when Philip destroyed Thermum in 218 (5.9–12): he reversed the mild policies of Antigonos, Philip II, and Alexander the Great and consequently acquired a reputation the reverse of theirs. Although the excerpt recording the plundering of Syracuse does not preserve any statement that Rome was heading down a slippery slope, we can safely assume that Polybius intended the reader to regard it as a symptom of decline. It is interesting to note that when discussing Greek opinions about the Roman treatment of Carthage in 146, Polybius includes one view that the affair represented a reversal of the principles by which Rome had won her supremacy: the war against Perseus of Macedon had hinted at such a reversal; that against Carthage now confirmed it (36.9.5–8). He also explains another, more moralizing position—that Rome had now substituted deceit and treachery for their former honesty. It is not necessarily the case that Polybius agreed with either of these assessments of what happened at Carthage, but clearly the abandonment of successful policies was something he regarded as both cause and evidence of imperial decline.

The theme is highlighted perhaps most famously in Polybius' analysis of Roman policy toward Egypt. In 163 BC the brothers Ptolemy VI Philometor and Ptolemy VIII Physcon appealed to Rome regarding their dispute about the division of Egyptian territory negotiated under senatorial supervision (31.10). Physcon, the younger brother, had received only Cyrene and now wanted Cyprus, too. The Roman envoys who had overseen the original division argued strongly for maintaining it, as Physcon was very unpopular and lucky even to get Cyrene, but the senate overruled them and found in favor of Physcon, whose interests coincided with their own. "For decisions of this kind are now very frequent with the Romans; by relying on the mistakes of others they effectively increase and secure their own empire, at the same time doing favours and appearing to confer benefits on the offenders." The implication that the Romans formerly did not make such cynical policy decisions is clear. Almost certainly Polybius saw the same trend operating in the senate a decade earlier. His account of Roman diplomacy at the beginning of the Third Macedonian War does not survive, but most scholars believe it is the source of Livy's version of those events (Livy 42.39–43). According to Livy, Rome was not prepared for war and in 172/171 the senate approved the policy of Q. Marcius Philippus in tricking the Macedonian king Perseus into believing that peace could be negotiated, while in reality Marcius was just playing for time. This was a step too far for older senators who did not like this "new

wisdom” and preferred the ancestral ways, but they were outvoted by those who thought that advantage was more important than honor. It is difficult to tell how much is Livian emphasis and how much Polybian, but the criticism of abandoning the principles of the past certainly accords with Polybius’ views.

Other examples of Roman cynicism include a persistent senatorial refusal to find in favor of Carthage in her disputes with Massinissa, king of Numidia; Roman interests dictated the policy, not justice, which was on Carthage’s side (31.21). So, too, the Roman decision to support the inferior claims to the Seleucid throne of the young Antiochus V and detain the rightful claimant, Demetrius, as a hostage in Rome, was made solely on the basis of Roman interests. They thought it was safer to have a boy on the throne than a vigorous adult (31.2). In the case of Massinissa and Demetrius, Polybius does not spell out the reversal of previous Roman principles, but it is reasonably clear he thinks the Romans would not have behaved this way in times past.

This theme of abandoning the principles by which Rome became great provides the clearest evidence that Polybius believed the process of Roman decline was under way. He also has harsh things to say about the degenerate youth of Rome. The young Scipio Aemilianus’ ambition to acquire a reputation for virtue was easily achieved in view of the disgraceful behavior of most of his contemporaries (31.25.2–8). They gave themselves over to boys and prostitutes, entertainment and eating, “having in the course of the war with Perseus been speedily infected by the Greek laxity in these matters.” Cato the Censor railed against this state of affairs ([chapter 1](#)). A complacency about the security of the empire had set in after the defeat of Perseus, and the riches of Macedonia, transported to Rome, had led to the ostentatious display of wealth. The corruption of the youth had military consequences. Only ten years later, it was proving difficult to find anyone willing to fight in Spain (35.4). After severe reverses, the young men already there were in a panic such as the older hands had never seen before. The cowardice even affected more senior ranks, which could not be filled, but worst of all was the reluctance of the youth to enroll. Scipio Aemilianus saved the day by offering his services as military tribune or legate, thus shaming the others into volunteering.

Is this all merely the jaundiced view of a grumpy old man who inevitably found the youth of his day inferior to that of previous generations? Or did Polybius really regard it as a sign of serious decline in the Roman body politic? These are not mutually exclusive possibilities, nor is a third. In both cases just referred to, Polybius’ main purpose is to praise Scipio. He thus has a vested interest in

emphasizing a contrast with decadent contemporary youth. That is not to say that there was no problem with the sudden influx of wealth from the East, or with recruitment for campaigning in Spain, but it is tempting to think that the emphasis serves primarily to play up Polybius' hero.

The Nature of Roman Rule after 167 B.C.

The fragmentary nature of the later books will always make it difficult to distinguish between Polybian disillusionment at particular imperfections of the Romans and a more theoretical assessment of whether their empire had already begun to decline. A repeated highlighting of the ways Rome had abandoned its previous principles of behavior indicates to me that Polybius thought the inevitable process of decline had started. Addressing the matter at all was presumably part of his attempt to evaluate Roman rule—which he claims was the reason for extending his plan to cover the period after 167 BC. It has been a matter of debate whether in the last ten books he did actually do what he said he was going to when he announced his change of plan in book 3 (3.4–5). One prominent view is that he could not resist the temptation of writing up a story for which he had excellent raw material, and in which he himself was one of the main players; this was his real purpose, but to justify the decision, he needed to find more respectable theoretical grounds, and hence we have the statement in book 3.

Let us just examine what Polybius said there; it is by no means straightforward. The achievement of conquest, he argued, can turn out to be a calamity for those who misuse the opportunity, whereas for those who endure bravely, defeat can turn into success. In view of this he felt it necessary

to append to the history of the above period [220–167 BC] an account of the subsequent policy of the conquerors and their method of ruling the world, as well as the various judgements and assessments made of them as rulers by their subjects; and finally I must describe the prevalent and dominant tendencies and ambitions of the various people in their private and public life.

The examination of these topics presumably demonstrated that in this case Rome's success had *not* proved a calamity to her and that the defeated had *not* managed to turn failure into success. It is a rather clumsy rationale for proving the obvious—unless there is a veiled reference to the triumph of Polybius' own career, bravely fashioned

from the ashes of Achaean disaster.

But Polybius does carry out the tasks he set himself. As we have seen, there is plenty of analysis of Roman policy. There are also signs that Polybius seriously addressed the issue of imperial opinions about Rome. I have referred to the analysis he makes in book 36 of Greek opinions about Rome's destruction of Carthage in 146 BC. It is a detailed account representing an interesting range of views: complete approval on purely pragmatic grounds (the Carthaginians were a deadly enemy and it was only sensible to take advantage of the opportunity to destroy them); disapproval, also on pragmatic grounds (Rome was unwisely abandoning the methods which had brought her success); severe moral criticism of what could only be described as impiety and treachery, in the way that Rome had now replaced her former straight dealing with deceit and fraud; and severe moral criticism of Carthage for impiety, treachery, and injustice. Interestingly, Polybius does not specify which (if any) of these opinions he himself held. This is the most sustained analysis of imperial opinions of Roman action in the surviving text, but we can safely assume there was more of this sort of thing in the lost parts. Last, there was obviously treatment of the tendencies and ambitions of individuals in both public and private life (a clear example is the account of "the tendency and ambition" of Scipio Aemilianus in 31.25.2).

By analyzing these prescribed subjects, Polybius goes on, contemporaries will be able to see whether Roman rule was acceptable or not, and future generations whether it was admirable or not. This is what will prove most useful about the work: for conquest is not an aim in itself, any more than sailing on the sea is. He repeats the point in a rather odd way: the final end achieved by the work will thus be knowledge of the condition of all Rome's imperial subjects. I suppose we are to take this as another way of identifying whether Roman rule was acceptable or admirable, although, on the face of it, it seems to be a different point altogether. It is only now that we learn Polybius is not talking about the entire period 167–146 BC, but about the years leading up to "the disturbed and troubled time that afterwards ensued" (3.4.12). Writing about this separately identified period involves him in having to start what he regards as almost a new work, for which he has new motivations. He is now driven by "the importance of the actions and the unexpected character of the events," and most of all by the fact that he himself not only witnessed the majority of events, but took part in and even directed some of them. At what stage the period of disturbance started is not at all clear, but a good case can be made that the excursus on geography in book 34 marks the end of the preceding period and divides it from the

account of the troubled times in books 35 to 39.

While it would be tempting to regard the change of plan in book 3 as involving two entirely separate stages—analysis of the acceptability of Roman rule, followed by an account of the period of troubles—it cannot work as neatly as that because Polybius obviously continues in the last five books to investigate Roman policy, the opinions of imperial subjects, and the careers of individuals. But there is something to be said for the idea that Polybius' thinking on the extension of his work beyond 167 BC is not altogether clearly worked out and that his move into the time of trouble is motivated by an additional desire to tell a good story in which he himself plays a leading role. Our Homeric hero, like his great exemplar Odysseus, was not one to hide his light under a bushel.

It is undoubtedly the case that Polybius admirably fulfilled the task he set himself at the very beginning of the work, to explain how and under what sort of constitution Rome conquered the world in the half century from 220 to 168 BC. In the end, does he answer the questions he posed in the revised plan—whether Roman rule was acceptable and what was the condition of the subjects of the empire? If we are looking for a clear and ringing statement on the matter, none survives. We might expect a summary at the end of the work, but what we get in 39.8, although it acknowledges the adjusted end date of 146 BC, seems to ignore the rationale he gave in book 3 for extending coverage to that time. Even from what survives we can see that there was sufficient analysis of Mediterranean affairs for a reader to make his own judgment on how the various people conquered by Rome were faring, and from that it should have been possible to see how they regarded Roman rule, but for us the loss of the complete text leaves only a dim outline. There is enough evidence to suggest that Polybius thought the Roman empire of his day was past its best, but not enough to identify a schedule for its decline; enough to indicate that he strongly disapproved of certain examples of Roman behavior, but not enough to conclude that his final assessment of Rome was uniformly negative. If there was some disillusionment in later life about the course of events, it did not cause him to revise the high praise he reserves in book 6, to which we now come, for Rome's remarkable political, military, and religious structures.

Further Reading

All the main scholarly works discuss Polybius' life and career: Walbank (1972, [chapter 1](#)) and Eckstein (1995, 1–16) are particularly helpful. Eckstein (1992) presents details and a full bibliography on the

debate about an early or late chronology for Polybius' life: he argues for the late, against, most influentially, Pédech (1961a) and Dubuisson (1980). Errington (1969) is the standard work on Philopoemen's career. On the history of Rome's rise to world power, the most important modern works are Harris (1979), Gruen (1984), and Ferrary (1988); a more manageable outline is in Derow (2003). On Callicrates, Derow (1970) is particularly valuable. Scipio Aemilianus' career is treated in detail by Astin (1967). Cunliffe (2001) is an attractive account of what we know about Pytheas of Marseilles and his world. The complicated origins of the war between the Achaean League and Rome are investigated by Gruen (1976); see also McGing (2003, 77–80). Among the many things written about Polybius' attitude to decline, see especially Walbank (1980); Eckstein (1995, 84–117, 229–36), who is vital on Polybius' sense of morality; Champion (2004, 144–69). Walbank (1977) makes the case that Polybius' stated purpose for extending the work after 168 BC is problematic and that he does not really answer the questions he set. Ferrary (1988, 289–316) thinks he does use the last ten books to evaluate Roman rule.

The Political Theorizing of Book 6

As we will see in the epilogue, the warm praise he received from John Adams, the second president of the United States of America, reflects the high regard in which Polybius has been held by political scientists since he first entered the stream of modern political thought at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Although some scholars have doubted the value of his political theorizing, in almost any contemporary discussion of Republican forms of government Polybius continues to receive honorable mention. The source of this fame is his discussion of the Roman constitution in book 6, in particular his analysis there of the way in which Rome's government, as he saw it, was a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. This analysis is, as far as we know, the first attempt to apply Greek political theory to the reality of Roman governmental structures and history, and the only attempt by someone who was technically an outsider to understand Roman success in terms of its constitutional excellence. Even if it is not equally successful in all its aspects, it is still a remarkable, problematic, and fascinating part of Polybius' bequest to posterity.

Book 6 was integral to Polybius' purpose, an essential part of his whole design. His fundamental aim, stated right at the start of the entire work, was to explain how and under what sort of constitution Rome had conquered the world (6.2.2–3). He had not only planned the book all along, he also knew exactly where it was going to come (as he explains already at 3.2.6)—that is, after recounting the battle of Cannae in 216 BC, when Rome was at her lowest ebb and her constitution triumphantly faced the greatest challenge of its history. There was no point judging either an individual or a state when they were enjoying a period of undisturbed composure (6.2.7). He could, therefore, have inserted the account after book 3, but, ever one for neat structures, Polybius decided first to bring the history of the eastern Mediterranean up to the same date, which necessitated books 4 and 5. Perhaps if the account of the constitution had appeared

immediately after book 3 we would now have it in its complete state, but unfortunately it is not fully preserved. We can make good sense of the substantial excerpts preserved of book 6, but the fact remains that we do not have Polybius' full presentation of this central element of his history, and we should keep this in mind when passing judgment on what seem to be inconsistencies or inadequacies. Given the fame of the book and attention paid to it, I will describe its main arguments and examine some of the problems to which they give rise.

The Cycle of Constitutions and the Mixed Form

The first major theme developed is the cycle of different types of constitution, what Polybius calls the *anakyklosis* (6.3–9). In a brief introductory summary (6.3.5–4.13) he sets out the main ingredients of the theory, at this stage merely with the intention of providing a taxonomy of constitutions. Analysts, he maintains, commonly but incorrectly identify three types of constitution: kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. These unnamed analysts are quite wrong, if they think that these are the only types or that one of them is best. For the best type of constitution is a mixture of all three—there is a concrete example of it in the Lycurgan constitution at Sparta—and, in fact, each of them has a corrupt form: tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule, respectively. A sole ruler can only be called a king when he is accepted voluntarily by the people and rules not with force but with reason; a real aristocracy has to consist only of the most just and wise men. And a genuine democracy does not exist when the people can do whatever they want, but only when the will of the majority prevails in a society where traditional values are upheld—respect for gods, parents, elders, the laws. Although Polybius has specifically just identified six types of constitution, he immediately adds another one: primitive monarchy. For these constitutions follow one another in a fixed order and in a cyclical manner; and the cycle is started by this primitive monarchy. Kingship is derived from it, and in turn gives rise itself to its corrupt form, tyranny, which is followed by aristocracy and its natural, degenerate successor, oligarchy; then by democracy and its dark side, mob rule, which completes the cycle (and, although he does not say it at this point, reintroduces primitive monarchy). In support of this scheme, and in order to explain specifically the process by which good forms of constitution develop into their bad equivalents, Polybius brings to bear biological theory. Just as with a living organism, so each of these forms has its birth, development, acme and decline. Understanding this natural rise and decline will enable you to tell

when and how and where the growth, perfection and end of each are likely to occur again. And it is to the Roman constitution above all that this sort of explanation may, in my opinion, be most successfully applied, since from the outset its formation and growth have been due to natural causes. (6.4.12)

Polybius then proceeds to enlarge on his summary with a more detailed account (6.5–9). The purpose now seems to be to explain what drives the political cycle he has outlined—it turns out to be a mixture of natural impulses and the application of reason—and why it can be used for prediction. Although there is much in this book that appears purely theoretical, we must remember Polybius' insistence on the usefulness of history. The abstract only interested him inasmuch as it could give practical assistance to the serious student. You can read about the subject in Plato and other philosophers, he says, but their exposition is long, complicated, and inaccessible. The degree of detail they provide is superfluous for practical purposes; his account, on the other hand, will offer just what is needed for pragmatic history and the acquisition of a general conception of the theory.

He starts with the formation of human societies. After a natural cataclysm (flood, famine, crop failure) human survivors band together for protection, like animals, and in the same way as the strongest animals take charge—bulls, boars, cocks—the strongest and bravest human rules by force. This man Polybius calls the monarch. In time, values develop naturally from observation and self-interest. When children are born, for instance, and behave ungratefully toward their parents, others observe this with displeasure at the prospect that they will be treated in the same way; and so an idea of justice begins to emerge. Brave defenders of the community are honored, those who act otherwise are criticized, leading to the development of honor and disgrace. When the monarch acts in accord with these developing values, the people begin to obey him out of respect, not fear, and to preserve his rule against competitors. Thus, when force yields to reason, the monarch becomes a king.

To start with, the people choose the king's descendants as their rulers on the assumption that they will share the same values as their ancestor. This is not perceived as an automatic hereditary right to rule, as the people can look outside the family for someone with the necessary judgment and intelligence. In olden times, these kings built defenses for the community and acquired lands, an arrangement of mutual self-interest for king and subjects. In their manner of living they did not separate themselves from their subjects. The decline from kingship to tyranny came with automatic hereditary succession. These new rulers, their natural tendency to dominance now unchecked by

popular choice, gave way to their appetites and set themselves apart by their dress and extravagant lifestyle, including sexual appetite. This caused a breakdown in the relationship between ruler and ruled, and kingship turned into tyranny. The best men in the state, “those least able to brook the insolence of princes” (6.7.9)—presumably because they were the ones in closest contact with the tyrant—began to conspire, and the people rewarded them by giving them power, thus bringing about aristocracy.

Again, it was hereditary succession that led to the decline of aristocracy. The fathers acted in the best interests of the people, but their sons, raised in the midst of privilege and power, behaved in exactly the same way as the hereditary successors of the kings: they gave themselves over to excess and sexual violence. With the degeneration of aristocracy into oligarchy, the people reacted as they had against the tyrants, killing or expelling the oligarchs. Having unsuccessfully tried first one ruler, then a few, the people now have no choice but to grant themselves the power. After two generations of democracy, however, there is no one left who has experienced the evils of oligarchy. With no examples before them to moderate natural tendencies, a nonchalance about freedom and equality and a lust for power take hold. The people, bribed by the rich and addicted to such gifts, find a disgruntled leader and bring the whole edifice of ordered society crashing down; they revert to savagery until a primitive monarch emerges to restart the whole cycle.

Polybius sums up (6.9.10): “Such is the cycle of constitutions [*politeion anakuklosis*], such is the management of nature [*phuseos oikonomia*] according to which constitutions change, are transformed and return to their original form.” As he had done in the summary version, Polybius ends by emphasizing the predictive power of this system. You may not be able to tell the exact timing, but you will always know where you are in the process and what the next form of constitution will be. As the Roman constitution has grown, to a greater extent than any other, in an entirely natural way, and will in due course decline naturally, it is particularly susceptible to this method of analysis, which itself is based on the laws of nature.

Polybius then moves on to his most famous contribution to constitutional debate, the “mixed” government of Rome (6.10–18). He starts by explaining what a mixed constitution was. The Spartan king, Lycurgus, had understood that the simple and good forms of constitution were naturally precarious, bearing within them the seeds of their own development into their bad forms. Just as rust and woodworm are natural to iron and wood, so despotism, oligarchy, and the savage rule of violence are natural to kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. With this in mind, Lycurgus decided to unite in one

constitution all the best features of the simple forms, creating a sort of balance between kingly, aristocratic, and democratic elements that would act as a check on the bad potential of any one form. By doing this he preserved liberty at Sparta for longer than it lasted in any other state. Polybius says that the difference between Lycurgus' constitution and Rome's was that he had applied *logos* (reason, calculation); Rome had not (6.10.12–14). This cannot mean that Polybius regarded it as a rational process at Sparta and irrational at Rome. The Roman constitution had advanced in a series of crises, in which the Romans had made the right decisions “in the light of experience acquired in disasters.” Obviously, in making the right decisions, they must have used reason. Almost certainly, *logos* refers to the calculated way in which Lycurgus figured it all out beforehand and devised Sparta's mixed constitution in one conscious move. The Romans got to the same place—the perfect constitution—in stages, moving forward in a series of decisions not made consciously with the formation of a mixed constitution in mind. I take Polybius here to mean that at a certain point in the mid-fifth century BC the sum of all their decisions amounted to a mixed constitution.

What are the issues that arise from this theory or set of theories?

One of the most obvious and most discussed topics of book 6 is the sources. Where did all these ideas come from? Taking my lead from Polybius himself, this is something I am going to pass over quickly, because there is obviously no single source or certainly no chance of being able to identify one in any work that survives, and it is a particularly speculative area of investigation. As we saw, Polybius referred, in a rather vague and unconvincing way, to the work of Plato and “certain other philosophers.” This, he seems to have felt, was all rather long and complicated, and his real interest lay in a simpler analysis that had particular relevance for his historical purposes. Philosophy could be altogether too abstract. When attacking Timaeus for his extreme use of paradox, he says he is almost as bad as the philosophers of the New Academy, “who wonder whether or not it is possible for people in Athens to smell eggs being cooked in Ephesus, and are uncertain of whether, while they are discussing the matter in the Academy, they are not somehow in fact lying in their beds at home and composing this discourse in a dream and not in reality” (12.26c.2). He also dismisses Plato's republic from his discussion of constitutions at the end of book 6, on the obvious grounds that it was purely imaginary (6.47.7–10). Polybius knew something about philosophical ideas, but does not seem to have had a great deal of time for them.

There is no doubt that you can identify the various philosophical

strands on which Polybius drew, but his precise debt to any one of them, or to any particular author, is far from clear. Starting in the fifth century BC with figures like Protagoras and Democritus, there was a long tradition of speculation on social origins, stretching down into Roman times. Discussion of the different types of constitution and their relative advantages presumably goes back to the time when Athens was moving toward democracy at the end of the sixth century BC. Herodotus (3.80–83) famously (and implausibly) places in the Persian court just such a debate about the relative merits of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy (and is also, perhaps, aware of their inferior forms). The notion of mixing these types appears at the same time: Thucydides (8.97.2) regarded Theramenes' government of the 5,000 at Athens in 411 BC as "a moderate blending of the few and the many." Both Plato and Aristotle are of central importance in the development of the debate on the forms of constitution, their degeneration, their order, and "mixed" government, but it is by no means agreed which, if either, is the more important for Polybius. After Aristotle many names are bandied about. The work of Aristotle's pupil Dicaearchus of Messana, for instance, was known to Polybius and is often plausibly thought to be his source for the mixed constitution, but it does not survive. This highlights the insuperable difficulty we face: Polybius almost certainly for the most part consulted contemporary works of Hellenistic philosophy, which, like Dicaearchus, simply do not survive. He was an educated Greek gentleman and must have read the classics of Greek philosophical literature; and as we observed in relation to previous historians, their ideas no doubt filtered into his consciousness, but it is highly improbable that he had a copy of Plato or Aristotle open in front of him. Whether he had any author open before him is perhaps a more open question than is often assumed. Our inability to identify particular philosophical (or indeed, historical) sources may, of course, be a simple matter of lost works: we cannot find the sources because they no longer survive. But it is also worth considering the possibility that we cannot identify them because Polybius fashioned them into a genuinely independent account, which did not slavishly follow any particular work.

A different type of problem that has occupied commentators concerns the internal consistency of Polybius' argument: how are we to reconcile the concept of a cycle and the linear progression of the biological pattern? A cycle by its nature just keeps going round and does not have a birth, death, or high point (Polybius certainly does not identify an acme for his normal *anakyklosis*). A living organism, on the other hand, does not go round in a cycle: it is born, it flourishes, it dies. To a certain extent, I wonder whether this difficulty has not been

exaggerated. When he first mentions the biological pattern (6.4.11–13), Polybius makes it quite clear that he is applying it to each of the forms of constitution individually, and, as I have already observed, its purpose seems to be to explain the process by which a good form of constitution turns into its corresponding bad form. Sole rule, for instance, taken as an organism, has its origins in the primitive monarch, grows to maturity in kingship, and declines into tyranny, eventually dying with the introduction of aristocracy. Government by “the few” must be assumed to have its origins in the last stage of sole rule: it is born in tyranny, matures with aristocracy, and declines into oligarchy, which itself marks the beginnings of democracy. And so on.

The problem really only arises when Polybius seems to apply the biological pattern to the cycle as a whole, in the summary I just quoted, where he identifies the *anakyklosis* as the way nature manages things so that constitutions “change, are transformed and return to their original form” (6.9.10). It seems to me possible to take this as a statement not that the cycle itself shares the natural life of an organism, but that it is the product of nature’s management, inasmuch as it could not exist if the individual forms of constitution did not develop and die biologically: if it was not for nature, there would be nothing to drive the cycle. There is a sense in which the introduction of new forms of constitution is also natural: the aristocratic reaction against tyranny, or the democratic reaction against oligarchy, are both the products of human reason, but of reason working in unison with the natural human instinct to seek protection. So nature informs the whole cycle, even if the latter is itself not like a living organism.

There probably does remain a difficulty, however, in the relationship between theory and reality. The cycle is purely theoretical, at least to the extent that Polybius had no example of a real state that had gone right through it and begun again with a primitive monarchy. You may be able to use it to identify where particular states are heading, but the reality of history does not demonstrate a cyclical pattern; it demonstrates a linear one, in which states develop, rise to greatness, and fall—and it is not always to do with their constitution, as we will see when we come to what Polybius says about Athens and Thebes. Interesting questions arise, then, about how or to what extent Polybius applies his theory to reality. How does Rome fit into any of these theoretical patterns? And is there any evidence that Polybius applied them in the rest of his work? At the end of book 6 he claims he has dealt with the Roman constitution’s “formation, growth, prime, and condition in its prime” (6.57.10). Unfortunately not all of this survives, and we are left to speculate, in particular, about the analysis of previous Roman history which we know Polybius included. This account, now lost, is commonly referred

to as the *archaeology*, to which we must briefly turn. Later in the chapter I examine whether any of Polybius' theorizing about constitutional matters surfaces outside of book 6.

The Archaeology

After the exposition of constitutional theory, the text breaks off, but it is clear from the briefest fragments and from where the text resumes (at 6.11) that Polybius included at this point a narrative of early Roman history down to about 450 BC, the year of the so-called Second Decemvirate. According to tradition, in 451 all the regular offices of state were suspended in place of a commission of ten (the *Decemviri*) appointed to draw up a code of law. They wrote ten tables of law and were replaced in 450 by a second ten-man commission, who produced another two tables (thus giving us the famous Twelve Tables, Rome's earliest body of law), but who refused to lay aside their office and behaved in an increasingly oppressive fashion. The following year saw the expulsion of the Decemvirate and the restoration of the consulship, after which time, we are told, Rome was a mixed constitution, reaching its most perfect development during the Hannibalic war. The purpose of Polybius' account must have been to illustrate the process by which Rome achieved this. One of the surviving fragments relates how Roman matrons were forbidden to drink wine and were required to undergo a sort of breathalyzer test each day by having to kiss their male relatives (6.11a.4). Later in book 6, Polybius does say that every constitution has two basic elements, customs and laws (6.47.1), so we can see how the story of the matrons may not have been an entirely incidental aside.

The biggest debate about the *archaeology* concerns its contents, and in particular to what extent, if any, it is valid to use Cicero's account of early Roman history in book 2 of his work, *On the Republic*, to reconstruct Polybius' lost narrative. The question arises in the first place because Cicero himself refers in the work to Polybius as a particularly reliable source for dates (*De re pub.* 2.27). Elaborate analysis is needed to tease out the somewhat arcane possibilities, and this seems an inappropriate place to go into great detail on the matter. In the end, it is simply not possible to establish with certainty the relationship between Polybius' and Cicero's account. It is, however, not that easy to abandon Cicero altogether, as he provides a model of Rome's constitutional development that at least helps us ask questions about and perhaps points us to a better understanding of what Polybius' version might have been. It is usually taken to be a reasonable assumption, for instance, that in some sense, Polybius

thought of Romulus as the primitive monarch; Numa, Tarquinius Priscus, and Servius Tullius as kings; Tarquinius Superbus as a tyrant; the early republic as an aristocracy; and the Decemvirate as an oligarchy. This has the awkward consequence of leaving out democracy, which is one of the vital elements of the mixed constitution. Did Polybius think it possible that Rome devised or developed the democratic part of the mixed constitution without experiencing democracy itself? Did he think that Rome simply followed in regular fashion the cycle of constitutions, but then for some reason broke out of it and moved straight from oligarchy to mixed government?

The answer Cicero provides is that all the necessary elements of a mixed constitution were in place in Rome's regal period, but not in the necessary balance; the true mixed constitution came into being only when the right balance was achieved. Given Polybius' emphasis on the natural development of the Roman constitution, the notion that its mixed character gradually evolved is an attractive one. If Rome merely followed the cycle in the normal fashion, we would have to assume a conscious, calculated decision to break out of it and follow oligarchy, not with democracy but with mixed government. We would need a Roman Lycurgus to make precisely the sort of artificial calculation that Polybius said Rome did not make.

It would certainly be intriguing to know what he wrote about this crucial stage in which Rome somehow either breaks or more probably, develops out of the cycle. I think we can be sure we have not missed events that could be interpreted as a democratic period in Rome's history. But on the model of Cicero, just because there had been no actual democracy does not mean that Rome did not already have sufficient democratic elements in the state for the development of a mixed constitution. The popular assemblies, for example, had been there since the distant past; and the introduction of the tribunes of the people (traditionally in 494 BC) might be seen as providing the sort of additional democratic practice that began to tilt the scales in favor of a balance. Polybius certainly emphasizes the importance of the tribunes as representatives of the people (6.16.4-5). This interpretation would mean that he probably did not see the earlier stages of Roman history as exactly representing the cycle: to reach mixed government naturally, there had to be something different, and the obvious possibility is that the Romans retained features of their abandoned constitutional forms. The lesson Rome learned, for instance, from the disaster of Tarquinius Superbus' tyranny was perhaps not to dispense entirely with kingship and introduce a pure aristocracy, but to retain some of the royal features. Similarly, the lesson of the oligarchic Decemvirate was indeed a democratic one, but

not exclusively democratic. Perhaps the crucial moment came with the Valerio-Horatian laws of 449 BC, which according to Livy (3.55) introduced a set of populist measures: decisions of the *plebs* passed in the tribal assembly were to be binding on the whole people, the decisions of all magistrates were to be subject to appeal, and tribunes of the people received legal protection against harm. There are severe problems with the historical accuracy of this statement, but the reality may not matter; there was a strong Roman tradition about a decisive democratic moment in 449 BC. For Polybius, this legislative response of the Romans to the oligarchic disaster of the Decemvirate may well have represented the last piece of the mixed constitution falling into place.

The Mixed Constitution at Rome

With an apology in advance for the mistakes and omissions that a homeborn Roman would not have made, Polybius embarks on an analysis of the workings of the Roman system (6.11–18). The balance between the three elements was so fine that you could not tell whether the whole system was aristocratic, democratic, or monarchic. “For if you fixed your eyes on the power of the consuls, the constitution seemed completely monarchical and royal; if on that of the Senate, it seemed again to be aristocratic; and when you looked at the power of the masses, it seemed clearly to be democratic” (6.11.12). Consuls, senate, and people then get a chapter each describing their powers, and a chapter each on the checks they exert on each other (except that there is no mention of checks imposed by the consuls on the senate).

Polybius’ statements about the distribution of powers are on the whole unproblematic, at least in terms of what they say; what they do not say is perhaps more interesting (as we will see shortly). This is a schematic account of the power structures, not an attempt to describe all features of the constitution. The consuls’ civil and military powers are well described. They were the commanders of Rome’s military forces and also in charge of all public affairs. All other magistrates, except the tribunes, had to obey them. They consulted the senate, introduced foreign envoys to it, and saw that its decisions were carried out. They summoned the senate and popular assemblies, proposed measures, and carried out the decrees of the people. Their military powers were all but absolute. They gave orders to the allies, appointed military tribunes, and enlisted legionaries. Through the quaestor assigned to them, they could draw down monies from the treasury as they saw fit (a power later taken over by the senate).

The senate controlled all state spending (except what the consuls could draw down on their own authority). Particularly important here was the budget of the censors for public works. The senate conducted criminal investigations in Italy in the matters of treason, conspiracy, poisoning, and assassination and arbitrated in disputes, responding to requests for assistance. Their control of foreign policy was extensive. They dispatched ambassadors to foreign lands and received envoys from other states, it being entirely their prerogative to decide on how to respond. If you happened to be in Rome, Polybius says, when the consuls were away, you could easily conclude, as many foreigners did, that Rome was an aristocracy run by the senate.

So what was left for the people? Exclusive control of elections and the law courts were the most important powers they had. They were the only court that tried capital offenses, but they also heard less serious cases. Curiously (from a modern point of view), Polybius seems rather more interested in this judicial role than in the more obvious ones: electoral power, approval of laws, decisions of war and peace, alliances and peace treaties.

As for the checks and balances, although the consuls may have appeared like kings in the field, they depended on the senate for supplies and soldiers' pay; more important, when the consular year ended, the senate could decide either to terminate their command or keep them on as proconsuls. It was also the senate who decided whether a consul should be granted the supreme honor of a Triumph. The people's check on the consuls lay in their decision-making power over peace terms and treaties and in the way the consuls had to answer to the people when they laid down their office. It is not clear what Polybius was referring to with this last statement: there was no regular accounting the consuls had to make, but they could be prosecuted by the tribunes for financial mismanagement after leaving office.

The most famous popular check on the power of the senate was the tribunician veto. This enabled a tribune, who, according to Polybius, was always obliged to act in the interest of the people (theoretically the case, but not obviously so in practice) to bring senatorial proceedings to a halt or prevent the senate from meeting at all. Polybius also mentions the requirement that constitutional change affecting the senate, and any special emergency investigations they wanted to carry out, had to be approved by the people.

The people's dependence on the senate and consuls is less satisfactorily explained. Polybius maintains that the senate had complete control over all public contracts leased by the censors and over the farming of taxes—which is correct—but also that these tasks were carried out by or in one way or another involved “the people” (to

plethos). He is equating “the people” here not with the popular assemblies, as before, but with the individuals who did these jobs, largely the equestrian class, although the trickle-down effects might extend further into the less wealthy sectors of society. Similarly, senatorial control of the civil courts he regards as another check on the people, as well as consular command of the armies: individuals would be nervous about opposing the consuls, knowing that they could end up before them in court or under their direct command in the army. These last two points seem distinctly weak to the modern eye; and although the effects of senatorial involvement in the public works and tax contracts are well observed, it is not the same sort of structural point Polybius was making before.

The steadying influence of this distribution of power and its system of checks and balances had the great advantage in Polybius’ eyes of being equally effective in times of threat from abroad and when the state flourished. In the former everyone was inspired to work together, and in times of prosperity, if any one of the power groups aimed to dominate, the other two would hold it back (6.18).

The big question that arises out of this section of book 6 is, has Polybius got it right? Is this an astute, accurate set of observations about the way the Roman system worked? There are undoubtedly some strange omissions, but, before rushing to judgment, it is important to note that there is a gap in the text at this point. It resumes with a long and technically detailed description of the Roman army, how it was organized (6.19–26)—matters such as conditions of service, enrollment, numbers, equipment, officers, mobilization—and how a camp was constructed (6.27–42). There must have been some transitional passage leading into it, but we do not know how long it was, and it has been suggested that it contained a description of the details of the constitution lacking in the schematic section we have just examined. What Polybius says about the Roman army (based either on his own observations or on a military handbook), is central to his explanation of how Rome conquered the world. We need not linger on the details, but we should note in passing that it is the single most important source of information on the Roman Republican army we have: with the practised eye of a military expert, Polybius has fashioned a clear and perceptive account. Furthermore, although any revelatory statement to this effect has been lost in the textual lacuna, it is difficult not to see the order, the calm, the discipline, the clear structures, and logic of the army as a metaphor for the Roman state as a whole.

If modern scholars were to try to explain the Roman constitution, what would they include that Polybius seems to have left out? They

would probably think first of trying to set out the functions and relationship with each other of the main magistracies and voting assemblies. Among the magistrates, it is really only the consuls who hold Polybius' attention, and to some extent the tribunes of the people. Quaestors and censors are mentioned only in passing, and there seems to be no word at all of praetors or aediles. More surprising is the absence of any attempt to distinguish between the main popular bodies, the tribal assembly (*comitia tributa*), the centuriate assembly (*comitia centuriata*), and the council of the plebs (*concilium plebis*). Although these three bodies were constituted quite differently and had different functions—in broad terms they represented the Roman people organized in substantially different ways and with different emphases on social class, wealth, and place of living—Polybius refers merely to “the people.” It would be a little like talking about the U.S. governmental system without distinguishing, for instance, between the House of Representatives, the Senate, and state governments, and calling them all “the government.” Of course, it is possible that this sort of detail was fully described in the missing part of the book, or that Polybius was just trying to keep things simple for a Greek audience who had no experience of systems with multiple voting assemblies. If so, it remains unimpressively vague.

Other matters Polybius has been accused of ignoring or failing to understand tend to relate to the details of social and political life. He does not, for instance, talk about the distinction between patricians and plebeians; he does not explain who the *nobiles* (the elite of the senatorial class) were and how senatorial politics really functioned; he only talks of the equestrian order, or of the Italian allies, when discussing the Roman army. In the past two decades and more, there has been a very lively disagreement among modern analysts about the fundamental nature of Roman Republican government, in which debate Polybius' evidence has had a key role. The question is, have Polybius and his supporters overestimated the importance of the democratic element in the Roman system, or was the constitution fundamentally aristocratic, as many previous generations accepted without question?

If there were a definitive answer there would be no debate, so all I can do on this occasion is take sides. I favor the approach of those who see Polybius' identification of the importance of “the people” as an accurate reflection of a political reality at Rome. In my opinion, he has that part more right than wrong. I also believe that the omissions, if they are such, are on the whole understandable if you accept Polybius' analysis as a schematic attempt to identify the centers of power in the Roman system, monarchic, aristocratic, democratic, not as an attempt to give an exhaustive description of the constitution. In

explaining his scheme, then, he has presented relevant and sufficient evidence.

On the other hand, is the scheme itself valid? Here it seems to me less clear whether Polybius' identification of the consuls as a monarchic element in the state has any real meaning. The consuls were members of the Roman aristocracy; they advanced to the consulship from the senate, so to speak, and returned to it after their year of office (or period as proconsuls, i.e., when their powers had been extended beyond the single year of their consulship). They retained something of the trappings of kingship, and, of course, command in the field looked like regal power, so I suppose it is just about possible to see them as, in a sense, kings elected for a year. But it is not a completely convincing argument. The Romans got rid of their kings at the end of the sixth century BC, detested the very concept of king, and tried hard to ensure that nobody could set himself up as king. Elevation to the consulship was decided ultimately by the people (although there were many other factors leading to the election of consuls that Polybius does not describe), and the senate took care to exercise a controlling influence. Polybius was right about the checks and balances in that regard, but not really about a genuine balance between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. This mixed constitution of the three types, extensively discussed in antiquity, looks like what it is—the neat schematizing of political theorists. Its application to the realities of Roman government is original and clever and works in places, but not quite overall. If Polybius had posited a mixed constitution that was a balance between aristocracy and democracy—this is arguably where at least one of the real tensions in the Roman state lay—he would have had a much better case.

The Roman Constitution and Others Compared

I raised the question earlier whether Polybius applied his theorizing of book 6 to other historical situations in other books. Before looking elsewhere, however, we should note that in book 6 he does turn to the real world of experience in setting out to discuss the constitutions of Athens and Thebes, Sparta, Crete, Mantinea, and Carthage (6.43–56). Athens, Thebes, and Crete are dismissed on various grounds from comparison with Rome, and Mantinea is ignored completely; really only Sparta and Carthage bear serious consideration in the context of Rome.

In the case of Athens and Thebes (6.43–44), neither conformed to the *anakyklosis*, growing in an unnatural way, having only a brief acme and then suffering a spectacular reversal of fortune. Their short

period of dominance did not stem from the excellence of their constitutions, but was achieved by outstanding individuals—Epaminondas and Pelopidas in Thebes, Themistocles at Athens. The problem in Athens was the inconstancy of the people, or, more fundamentally, the state's radical democracy. For Polybius this was all but mob rule. There is an extended simile of the constitution as the ship of state—a metaphor made famous by Plato in the sixth book of the *Republic* (488 A–E)—with the Athenian people as an unreliable crew who do not listen to the captain and snatch disaster from the jaws of successful tranquility. At Thebes, too, it was the crowd who controlled everything. The Athenians were headstrong and spiteful, the Thebans violent and passionate.

Polybius' interest in Crete is limited to refuting the views of Ephorus, Xenophon, Callisthenes, and Plato in two particulars—namely, that the Cretan constitution resembled the Spartan, and that it was to be admired (6.45–47). Interestingly, one of the differences he emphasizes is the annual nature of the Cretan magistrates as opposed to the lifelong positions of the Spartan kings and ephors. By the time of Polybius, the Spartan kingship had been abolished, clearly showing that we are dealing with the past, not with contemporary politics. On the subject of why the Cretan constitution should not be admired, Polybius makes an important general statement about constitutions—that two things are fundamental, customs and laws. When a state has good customs and laws, it makes the citizens good; bad customs and laws have the opposite effect. So if you identify men acting greedily and unjustly, you can safely conclude that their constitution is bad. In personal behavior, Polybius maintains, there were few people as treacherous as the Cretans, and in public policy few states more unjust. Thus the Cretans are ushered off the stage.

After also dismissing Plato's imaginary republic from consideration, Polybius comes at last to a constitution he does admire, that of Sparta (6.48–50). His admiration, however, is limited to its internal excellence. With his equal distribution of land to the Spartans and the temperate communal life that he introduced, Lycurgus created a harmonious and secure state in its internal relations. But he failed to create the same contentment or necessary resources when it came to relationships outside the state. The Spartans were ambitious to conquer Greece, but their resources and the Lycurgan system of exchange, while adequate for the simple life in Sparta, were not sufficient for campaigning outside the Peloponnese. Lycurgus had failed to develop an infrastructure suitable for empire building; in this the Spartan constitution was inferior to that of Rome.

Carthage, on the other hand, clearly could manage foreign conquest, and it offered the most immediately relevant comparison with Rome

(6.51–56). It is the only case in book 6, besides Rome, in which Polybius invokes his cycle of constitutions and biological theory of rise and decline. The vital difference between Carthage and Rome was that as Carthage had come to power earlier than Rome, the Carthaginian constitution was further on in the process of degeneration than Rome, which was at its most excellent state of development.

Consequently at Carthage the people had already acquired the main influence in deliberations, while at Rome the senate still retained this. The result was that, as in Carthage the people deliberated and in Rome the aristocrats, the Roman decisions on public affairs were better, so that although they met with complete disaster, they were finally by the wisdom of their counsels victorious over the Carthaginians in war. (6.51.6–8)

Polybius does not spell it out, but the implication of this passage is that mixed constitutions (or certainly those of Rome and Carthage) degenerate in the direction of mob rule. Presumably this would in due course create chaos and bring the cycle of constitutions back to its beginning in primitive monarchy. Carthage was already on the slippery slope to mob rule, but Rome was certainly no raw democracy: public policy was devised by the elite. Those who want to argue that Polybius was really envisaging an aristocratic government at Rome would point to this statement. But it is consistent with his picture of the mixed constitution: the people had a say in the decision-making processes, but the senate did the deliberating. This was, in his opinion, the right balance.

If the constitution was the underlying reason for Rome's superiority, there were other more practical reasons. Rome's army was made up of citizens and Italian allies; Carthage relied on mercenaries. Not surprisingly, as the Romans were fighting for their land and children, they displayed more passion than the Carthaginian mercenaries. Although the Romans were not as good at naval warfare, they made up for their lack of skill with superior bravery, a quality that Roman institutions were careful to foster. As an example of such an institution, Polybius famously offers the case of the Roman aristocratic funeral (6.53–54). The pomp and circumstance of the ceremony, with its glorification of the deceased and his ancestors, inspire Rome's youth to great deeds on behalf of the state. Polybius cites the case of Horatius, who bravely held the bridge against the advancing army of Lars Porsenna and sacrificed his life for his country. In addition, Roman behavior in relation to wealth was much superior, bribery being a capital offense in Rome, but openly practised in Carthage. Roman religion was also vastly better than Carthaginian in exercising social control.

After summarizing again the biological life of constitutions, book 6 ends with an edifying story of Roman determination in the immediate aftermath of the battle of Cannae. In this way, the reader is brought back to the narrative of events in Italy, where Polybius had left off in book 3, and the scene is set for book 7. Hannibal allowed 10 representatives of the 8,000 Roman prisoners taken at Cannae to return to Rome to beg for their ransom. With allies abandoning the Roman side and the city of Rome itself in danger, the senate refused to ransom them, thus depriving Hannibal of money and proving to Roman soldiers that they must either conquer or die; there was no hope of safety in defeat.

Book 6 and Its Application Elsewhere in the *Histories*

The purpose of Polybius' theorizing in book 6 was explicitly to analyze the Roman constitution and its role in Rome's success. It was not presented as a blueprint for understanding Hellenistic history in general, but as we have seen, Polybius does have things to say about other famous governments of the past and of the contemporary Carthaginian constitution. Given his own readiness, then, to apply what he has said to other cases, it seems legitimate for us to try to identify the influence of his theorizing elsewhere in the surviving books and fragments.

As the Hellenistic east was ruled by kings, we might expect the sole rule stage of the constitutional cycle to be prominent—the change from primitive monarchs to true kings, or from kings to tyrants—and there are indeed examples. The most prominent is Philip V of Macedon, who changed from a king into a tyrant. His destruction of Thermum in 218 BC is seen as the first sign of a change for the worse (5.9). Here, leniency would be the mark of a king, the destruction he wrought the sure sign of a tyrant: “For it is the work of a tyrant to do evil and thus rule men by fear against their will, hated himself and hating his subjects; a king, on the other hand, does good to everyone, loved for his beneficence and humanity, ruling and presiding over a willing people” (5.11.6). This is very much the language of book 6. It was at Messene that Philip's decline into tyranny became fact, here that he changed not from a man into a werewolf, but from a king into a bitter tyrant (7.11–14). As we saw in [chapter 3](#), Philip was superbly endowed with the natural qualities of a king. One of the emphases we might note in Polybius is that the crucial part of Philip's kingly excellence was natural to him, while he acquired the bad things, like

some horses, as he got older (10.26.7–8). The same assumption lies behind the question posed in book 4: “So what was it that defeated all these qualities and turned a natural king into a savage tyrant?” (4.77.4). Something unnatural seems to overwhelm his natural excellence. Such an interpretation of the unnatural quality of tyranny is perhaps not entirely consistent with the account of book 6. As we observed, when the restraints of popular choice were removed from the selection of kings and hereditary succession took over, the new rulers were enabled to indulge their natural appetites and thus turn into tyrants. In the *anakyklosis* the natural tendency seems to be toward the bad, whereas Philip’s natural state was good.

There is, of course, no requirement for Philip to conform absolutely with theory. His use of clothing certainly does not. At Argos in 209 BC, he decided to lay aside his diadem and purple robe, in an attempt to dress more democratically (10.26). Indeed, the good king does not try to stand out from his subjects with his dress, food, and drink; it is precisely the tyrant who does this (6.7.5–7). Philip’s reversal of the norm is also an affirmation of it: he is trying to disguise his tyranny by behaving (superficially) as he knows a good king should. In fact, the more democratically dressed he was, the worse he behaved: “For he no longer confined himself to seducing widows or committing adultery with married women, but used to send for and order any woman he chose to come to him, and insulted those who did not at once obey his orders by making noisy processions to their houses.” This sort of sexual terrorism is exactly the kind of demand made by the tyrant of book 6. Ptolemy IV Philopator’s interest in sex and the good life should also be symptomatic of a tyrant, but he does not seem as tyrannical as Philip: his are sins of omission. He certainly did not qualify as a good king, but neither was he a typical tyrant. Human beings vary, and Polybius felt no need to define them too narrowly within theoretical types.

The word “tyrant” (*turannos*) occurs seventy times in the surviving text, and many rulers are called tyrants, but only one other king is explicitly stated to have turned into a tyrant: Cleomenes of Sparta, who “overturned the ancient constitution and changed the lawful kingship into a tyranny” (2.47.3). This is interesting because it provides an instance of a mixed constitution turning into a tyranny. The mixed constitution of Carthage, as we saw, was moving toward mob rule, and the implication is that Rome will head inexorably in the same direction. Polybius tells us that Sparta’s mixed government enjoyed perfect health until the battle of Leuctra in 371 BC, but then went into steep decline, until Cleomenes introduced tyranny (the story is recounted at 4.81 and elsewhere). Somewhat awkwardly, Antigonos Gonatas then restored “the ancestral constitution” (2.70.1), which

itself yielded again to the tyranny of Lycurgus (a namesake of the ancient founder of the Spartan system) and then of Nabis. As we are dealing here with a mixed constitution, there is no reason why it should conform to the normal cycle of governments. In Sparta's case, perhaps the balance of elements was more in favor of the kings than at Rome (Rome, after all, unlike Sparta, did not actually have kings in its mixed government), and the degeneration of the constitution may have manifested itself in the corruption of this royal element into tyranny. This would mean, at least theoretically, that Sparta could then proceed to aristocracy/oligarchy, democracy/mob rule, and eventually primitive monarchy. But Polybius' thoughts almost certainly do not stretch beyond the single transition from mixed constitution to tyranny, and anyway there was nothing natural about the original mixed system devised by Lycurgus. Sparta, like Thebes and Athens, is just another one of those states where the theory does not fully apply. This does not seem to have worried Polybius.

Nabis of Sparta demonstrated that tyrannies could be long-lived ("he laid the base and foundation of a lasting and oppressive tyranny"; 13.6.2), and there is no example in Polybius of a tyranny becoming an aristocracy. The downward trend, however, of the biological progression to decay seems to be maintained in all circumstances. Sparta's unusual restoration of her mixed government, which we have just examined, was short-lived and artificially imposed from outside; it should probably be seen as part of one extended transition to tyranny. Perseus, Philip's son, started out as an improvement on his father, specifically in being temperate regarding women and drink (25.3.8), but this is not a reversal of the cycle from tyranny back to kingship. It is just a literary repetition of the way his father's reign demonstrated the same high hopes cruelly dashed. Indeed, Perseus' cowardice probably made him even worse than his father ([chapter 4](#)).

There are also no surviving examples of the transformation of aristocracy into oligarchy. There is a brief reference to the establishment of democracy at Messene in 215 BC, which was almost certainly at the expense of an oligarchy (7.10.1), and there certainly seem to be situations where mob rule and the end of the cycle are close. The best example is furnished by Boeotia, to whose decline Polybius devotes some detailed chapters (20.4–7). During the period of Thebes' dominance after the battle of Leuctra, Boeotia flourished, but after defeat by the Aetolians in the mid-third century BC,

they became so dispirited that they never after that event aspired to any honourable distinction, nor did they by common decree take part with the other Greeks in any action or struggle, but abandoning themselves to good cheer and drunkenness sapped

the energy not only of their bodies but also of their minds.
(20.4.6–7)

Polybius then outlines some of the Boeotians' political errors—not the least being that they abandoned the Achaeans and went over to the Aetolian League, a fatal flaw for Polybius, if ever there was one—but it is their internal decline that is most striking. For twenty-five years, the legal system of the Boeotians had ceased to operate, and

certain strategi [chief magistrates] even provided pay out of the public funds for the poor, the populace thus learning to court and invest with power those men who would help them to escape the legal consequences of their crimes and debts and even in addition to get something out of the public funds as a favour from the magistrates. The chief proponent of this policy was Opheltas, who was constantly contriving some scheme apparently calculated to benefit the populace for the moment, but perfectly sure to ruin everyone in the end. (20.6.2–5)

This is all very close to Polybius' description of the end of the *anakyklosis* in book 6:

For the people, having grown accustomed to eat at someone else's expense and to depend for their livelihood on their neighbours, as soon as they find a leader who is generous and enterprising, but excluded from the honours of office by lack of funds, institute the rule of violence; and now gathering together they massacre, banish, and plunder, until they degenerate again into perfect savages and find once more a master and a monarch. (6.9.8–9)

Boeotia has not quite reached the very end, but the actions of the strategi in making the people dependent on handouts, and the rise of Opheltas, seem to coincide very closely with the last part of the cycle.

Realistically, the complete collapse of an advanced society is difficult to conceive of; usually, outside agencies prevent it. Both Tarentum and Capua in the third century BC, for instance, appear to be at the end of the cycle. Pride and prosperity led Tarentum to call in the help of the famous King Pyrrhus (8.24). For every democracy, Polybius explains, when too long in power, naturally gets tired of the situation and looks for a master. If this sounds reminiscent of the end of the cycle for Tarentum, the whole process is artificially altered by Rome's eventual victory. The same thing happened to Capua during the Hannibalic war (7.1). They could no longer support the burden of their own prosperity and called in Hannibal; whatever natural process they might have undergone thereafter was brought to a halt by Rome.

What emerges from our investigation is that in the course of his detailed narrative, Polybius is not interested in trying to track down examples of constitutional change to prove his theory. He is mostly dealing with very specific moments in time, and, as one would expect, is only likely to see single transitions from one form of government to another. On the whole, they conform to the patterns identified in book 6, but the theory only provided a model of what usually happened in the way governments developed: Polybius was no doctrinaire theorist, and even in book 6 explicitly excludes Athens and Thebes. We have noted small deviations, and there are other larger ones. Best known is the change of the Achaean constitution from kingship to tyranny and then straight to democracy (2.41.4–5). Because this comes before book 6, it might be argued that Polybius had not yet worked out exactly what he thought, but we probably do not need the excuse. He was simply too practical a thinker to feel it necessary to fit all the details of history into a theoretical straitjacket. Ironically, had he lived 100 years later, he would have had by far the best candidate for the completion of his cycle in Rome itself. He himself witnessed Rome's mixed constitution at its height and probably as it began to decline. The collapse of the Republic in the first century BC into demagoguery and bribery of the populace reflect neatly the rise of mob rule, with the civil wars signaling the degeneration of the state into complete savagery. Octavian then seems the perfect candidate for the role of primitive monarch, muscling his way to power at first, but then yielding to the dictates of reason and transforming himself into a king.

Fate/Chance (*Tyche*)

Before we take our leave of Polybius himself and briefly examine his influence on subsequent generations, there is one further aspect of his work that I want to discuss. It is his use of the word *tyche*, which occurs frequently throughout the work and whose meaning seems to cover what in the English language most people would tend to regard as two different, if closely related, things: chance, something casual and random, and fate, something more rigid and inflexible. For Polybius, the two are functionally similar, as being powers beyond human control that affect human affairs. If he fails to devise a carefully distinguished vocabulary for these concepts, it is because he does not have a developed theory to present: one personified goddess, Tyche, is adequate to describe both powers (and indeed, possibly other slightly different ones as well). This can sometimes make it difficult for us to decide whether Polybius is saying that something happened by chance, or whether he has in mind a more substantial

notion of predetermination. In what follows I am interested primarily in the latter, in Fate with a capital *F*. I raise it now, perhaps a little perversely, because although book 6 would appear a natural place for an extended discussion of the workings of Fate and how it brought about the rise of Rome, *tyche* is in fact conspicuous by its absence from this book.

We have already seen in [chapter 2](#), when tracking Polybius' debt to his predecessors, how he seems to reflect the same sort of mutable and capricious chance we find in Herodotus. For our present purposes, we can observe that in many circumstances, what we are dealing with is little more than a matter of words. In the same way we might say, "as fate would have it," without intending to enunciate a theory of predetermination, so Polybius can say, for instance, in connection with Carthage's mercenary war, that fate (*tyche*) gave both sides the opportunity for inflicting the most terrible punishment on each other (1.86.7); that fate gave Cheilon the opportunity to punish the Spartan ephors in a manner befitting their crime (4.81.5); or that Hermeias refused the crown that fate offered him (5.42.8). Perhaps use of the word "fate" can help highlight particularly dramatic events, but in these and many other instances, it can scarcely be more than a rhetorical flourish without significance, just a dramatic way of describing events.

There are, however, other places where something more substantial seems to be at stake. A great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the matter, since for someone as supremely rational as Polybius, who believed that history was useful and that it was the historian's purpose to find out how and why things happened, it seems exceptionally unlikely that he would have had much time for some advanced concept of Fate as an important controlling factor in human affairs. On certain occasions, although he specifically contradicts those who incorporate *tyche* as an explanatory mechanism, it is not immediately clear whether he is talking about chance or Fate. For example (1.63.9):

This confirms what I said at the beginning that it was not because of *tyche*, as some Greeks think, or spontaneously, but by schooling themselves in such vast and perilous enterprises that the Romans quite understandably not only gained the courage to aim at universal dominion, but executed their purpose.

Is Polybius saying that Roman supremacy was not achieved "by chance," or that it was not arranged "by Fate?" On this occasion he is emphasizing how the Romans themselves planned and prepared their dominance: it was not an accidental process, not a matter of chance—they were responsible for achieving what they achieved. In fact, as we

will see shortly, Fate did have a distant role in Rome's success, but not chance. Again, in 197 BC when the Romans defeated Philip V of Macedon at the battle of Cynoscephalae, Polybius sought to account for the Roman superiority (18.28.4–5):

It will prove useful and beneficial to inquire into the difference, and into the reason why on the battlefield the Romans have always prevailed and carried off the palm, so that we may not, like foolish men, talk simply of *tyche* and congratulate the victors without giving any reason for it, but may, knowing the true causes of their success, praise and admire them on a rational basis.

The true cause of their military success was their own excellence (in discipline, courage, structures, etc.), which they themselves had created, and Polybius can only mean here that it was not a matter of chance. Nor would you expect it to be. From the very outset of the work his whole purpose had been to explain the rational process of how and under what sort of constitution Rome had conquered the world (1.1.5–6): her advance was intentional and rationally planned (1.3.6).

So how, then, do we reconcile this sort of thinking with what seems to be at first glance the wholly inconsistent identification of the rise of Rome and unification of world history as “the most beautiful and useful performance of *tyche*” (1.4.4)? And here Fate or Providence must be the right translation, as chance can hardly be thought to plan things. If it was all predetermined, how could Rome have done it all herself? Even more strikingly, in book 8 Polybius asks how and under what sort of constitution Fate unified the world (8.2.3): the word *tyche* seems to have been substituted for “Rome.” Are we now talking about a superior power that organizes human events in a specially designed way? Or is it just a manner of speaking, a way of emphasizing the drama and grandeur of world events? In general terms, I regard the latter as the right answer, although it is perhaps not an entirely simple issue.

The passage I have just quoted, analyzing the reasons for Roman military superiority over Macedon, fits into an explanatory theory clearly stated by Polybius toward the end of the work (36.17). Things beyond human understanding, he says there, like the weather or disease or the reasons why the Macedonians supported Andrisus against Rome in 149 BC, may be attributed to *tyche* and the divine, but it is not acceptable to do so when the causes can be discerned—as was the case with the low birthrate in Greece. In other words, some distant power arranges the weather and other inexplicable things over which humans have no control. Obviously, Rome's victory in 197 BC had

rationality identifiable causes that were nothing to do with chance or randomness. There is, then, a level of normal historical activity that demands normal, rational explanation, and another level of human affairs where it is perfectly acceptable to invoke a supernatural explanation for what happens. Polybius consistently observes his own rule: in the vast majority of cases where *tyche* is invoked, it is used to explain the sort of thing that is simply not susceptible of rational analysis. Curiously, this would not normally include a simple case of political allegiance, such as the reasons for the Macedonian support of Andriscus in 149 BC. Polybius was so astonished at what he regarded as the inexplicable behavior of the Macedonians that he could only explain it as some sort of “heaven-sent madness” (*daimonoblabeia*). This appears to be an uncharacteristically tame surrender to a supernatural explanation. But the question still arises whether in allowing *tyche* (or divine intervention) to explain the otherwise inexplicable, Polybius is thinking of a real supernatural force, or whether this is just a rhetorical way of identifying things that defy rational explanation. I favor the latter; in this case, it is a way of saying that the Macedonians simply lost their wits and acted irrationally.

Regarding a personified Fate or Providence that provides the master plan, so to speak, of world events, there is no doubt that Polybius uses this sort of language, but I think we can still see it as belonging to the same explanatory theory at work I have just mentioned, where it accounts for things that have no rational explanation. There are some observations we can make about Fate or Providence and Polybius.

First, no one who believed and stated that *tyche* was a last resort for explaining the truly mysterious could possibly assign to it Rome’s conquest of the world: that would make a nonsense of the whole purpose of Polybius’ work, and of the whole idea of pragmatic history. So if *tyche*, in the sense either of Fate or chance, has any reality at all, it certainly does not explain the big things in the political world.

Second, in both the potentially problematic statements I have cited in which *tyche* is said to have unified the world (1.4.4, 8.2.3), thus apparently usurping Rome’s role, Polybius is engaging in a polemic with the writers of monographs and there can be little doubt that at least part of the point in introducing Fate here is to ennoble the cause of universal history writing: it is an effective way of emphasizing how monographs fail to reflect the grand design of the world.

Third, it is worth emphasizing what I have already pointed out, that in book 6, where Polybius offers theoretical models of the way in which types of government develop and change—in other words, just where you might expect some explanation of the role of Fate in deciding the future of nations—there is not a mention of it in this

connection. It occurs only twice in the surviving text of book 6, in relation to Thebes and Athens (6.42.2–5), both of which grew by no natural process, but as a result of “*tyche* and circumstance.” Their dominance was not connected with constitutional excellence, but resulted purely from the leadership of extraordinary men, as *tyche* subsequently made clear at Thebes: as soon as Pelopidas and Epaminondas died, Thebes was finished. In the first case it is clear that Polybius was at a loss to explain the sudden flourishing of these two states: it defied rational explanation and could therefore be ascribed to *tyche*. In the second case, *tyche* seems to mean little more than “subsequent events,” the way things turned out at Thebes; it is certainly not some creative, designing force.

Fourth, having set out the rational process of Rome’s conquest of the world in [chapter 1](#) of book 1, and repeated it in [chapter 3](#), can Polybius really have forgotten this in the very next chapter, where the process now seems to be Fate’s finest achievement? This is scarcely conceivable. We must, I believe, assume that he saw no inconsistency and was simply employing two different modes of expression. There was nothing fortuitous about the reasons why Rome was able to conquer the world: political structures, army, religion, planning, courage, and determination, all the qualities analyzed in book 6 and itemized elsewhere in the narrative, combined to explain exactly why Rome got where she got. The addition of Fate makes the story a truly grand one, but also explains one further thing that reason cannot: the answer to the question, why Rome, why now? It was easy enough to explain the various ways in which Rome was superior to other states, and therefore why she was able to conquer them, but not why it was now Rome’s turn, so to speak, for world dominance, not why she had all these world-beating qualities in the first place. There was no rational, humanistic explanation for this bigger schedule of world events, for what is essentially a philosophical question. At such a level of abstraction, there was nothing inconsistent in using the language of a designing force in the world: this Fate operated at an entirely different level from the realities of military and political power. This was what Polybius was referring to when talking of Fate’s finest achievement. It is a far more eloquent and memorable way of talking about the unknowable than simply admitting we do not know the answer, but that is what it is—a recognition of the limits of rational explanation.

This sort of grand, designing Fate occurs elsewhere in the work. At the beginning of book 4, for instance, we hear how Polybius’ main story begins in about 220 BC, because Fate had rebuilt the world at that time, with new rulers coming to power all over the Mediterranean (4.2.4). This is an important moment for Polybius, and

Fate lends it a fitting dignity, but it also belongs to that sphere of events that has no logical explanation—rulers all dying or moving aside at the same time—which one may justifiably ascribe to Fate.

Sometimes *tyche* takes on the role almost of an avenging fury. When Philip V and Antiochus IV make their wicked agreement to push aside the young Egyptian king and carve up Egypt between them, Polybius is delighted to describe how Fate punished them (15.20.5–6):

But at the same time, who among those who reasonably find fault with Fate for her conduct of affairs, will not be reconciled to her when he learns how she afterwards made them [Philip and Antiochus] pay the due penalty. . . . For even while they were still breaking their agreements with each other and carving up the boy's kingdom she raised the Romans against them, and most justly and properly inflicted on them the very evils which they had been designing, contrary to all law, to inflict upon others.

Later on, Fate really has it in for Philip, when she sends terrible punishments for his wickedness (23.10).

When he attributed these and other slightly different roles to *tyche*, I do not believe Polybius really had in mind a divine force, a power that was able to bring about all the changes of rulers in 220 BC, for instance, or arrange things so that Rome would now be the world's superpower, or see that Philip and Antiochus would receive their due punishment. If he had some notion of a theory of Providence, a designing force in the world, he certainly did not care to work it out in detail. The language of the Greeks had for a long time personified Fate as a goddess, and Polybius no doubt shared that same linguistic instinct. Fate served him as a rhetorical device for dignifying his history and recognizing the questions we cannot answer, but they were not the important things that really needed explanation: these would yield their meaning to the rational analysis of pragmatic, universal history, written by the soldier-politician.

Further Reading

As always the place to start is Walbank—his commentary (Walbank 1957), his general book on Polybius (Walbank 1972, 130–56), and at least two important articles (Walbank and Brink 1954; Walbank 1998). Pédech (1964, 302–30) has full and sensible discussion of the main issues. One of the clearest and most detailed modern expositions of book 6 is Trompf (1979, 1–115). Helpful recent coverage of a more general nature will be found in Lintott (1999, 16–26, 214–20) and

Millar (2002, 23–36). Hahm’s article on Polybius’ political theory (Hahm 1995) seems to me especially interesting. Of particular studies of Polybius’ sources for book 6, the fullest is Cole (1964), but Walbank’s commentary addresses the problem at all relevant points. Pocock (1975, 66–80) has been influential in emphasizing Polybius’ debt to Aristotle, but Nippel (1994, 7–10) and Nelson (2004, 3–4) identify difficulties. There has been a huge amount written on the “mixed” constitution, the most important being von Fritz (1954) and Nippel (1980). The debate about the presence of a real “democratic” element in the Roman Republican government started with the challenge of Millar (1984) to the generally accepted view of Rome as an aristocracy. He has followed with more articles and a book that have (among other points) pressed the same case: for example, Millar (1986, 1989, 1998). Others do not agree: Hölkeskamp (2000) represents the opposing view and usefully cites the scholarship. Valuable discussions of Fate are found in Walbank (1957, 16–26), Pédech (1964, 331–54), Walbank (1972, 58–65), and Ferrary (1988, 265–76).

Epilogue: Into the Future

I wish to assemble together the opinions and reasonings of philosophers, politicians and historians, who have taken the most extensive views of men and societies, whose characters are deservedly revered, and whose writings were in the contemplation of those who framed the American constitutions. It will not be contested that all these characters are united in Polybius.

—John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), Letter XXX

It is not my intention in this brief epilogue to offer an exhaustive survey of the reception of Polybius by his successors. But it seems desirable to touch on at least some of the highlights of the career his *Histories* enjoyed after his death. It was a career by no means as brilliant as the giants of classical literature. Polybius did not receive the acclaim or attention awarded to Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero or to Thucydides, Herodotus, Livy, or Tacitus. Although his work survived, it only did so in an abbreviated form, a situation that in itself seems to betray the negative judgment of Byzantine scholars, who apparently found Polybian excerpts, rather than the full text, sufficient unto their needs. But it is also true that Polybius has always had his admirers, both as a political and military historian, and particularly as the most important transmitter from antiquity of the theory of mixed government. This latter role has won for him a position of honor among the theorists and historians of government in the field of political science, a position he still holds.

The Classical World

In 48 BC, on the night before the battle of Pharsalus (at which Julius Caesar defeated Pompeius), while others slept or worried about the coming battle, Marcus Iunius Brutus (one of the future assassins of Caesar), was, according to Plutarch (*Brutus* 4.8), busy writing an

epitome of the work of Polybius (it does not survive). There are sufficient references elsewhere in Greek and Roman literature to indicate that Polybius was well regarded by subsequent generations. Cicero called him “an especially fine writer” (*bonus auctor in primis; De Officiis* 3.113). Livy maintained he should by no means be ignored (*haudquaquam spernendus auctor; 30.45.5*) and thought of him as a reliable historian of Rome in all matters, especially with regard to Greek affairs (33.10.10). The Greek biographer Plutarch cites Polybius twenty-six times and clearly uses him extensively in his *Life of Flaminius*. That great first-century AD polymath Pliny the Elder cites him a dozen times as a geographical authority, particularly on the distances between places. For example (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 5.90):

Agrippa gives the total length of Africa from the Atlantic and including lower Egypt as 3,050 miles. Polybius and Eratosthenes, who are considered the most careful authorities, make it 1,100 miles from the ocean to Carthage, and 1,628 miles from Carthage to Canopus, the most westerly mouth of the Nile.

If the general reception seems positive, it was not quite a standing ovation. As we saw in the introduction, Dionysius of Halicarnassus found Polybius hard going, and one of the loudest silences is that of the first-century AD educationalist Quintilian, who, in perhaps the most famous critique of Greek and Latin writers that survives from antiquity (*Institutio Oratoria* 10.1), does not mention him—although it is only fair to point out that Quintilian was emphasizing stylistic qualities and assessing their value to the orator. It would be superfluous to cite here all the references to Polybius made by classical writers, but before going on to sketch Polybius’ influence in the modern world, it might be instructive to illustrate rapidly one particular author who used his work as a source and see what his adaptations might say about Polybius. I refer to Livy, who was writing about a century after him.

It does not happen very often that we have extant from antiquity both a work of history and one of its main literary sources—which explains the extensive study expended on Livy’s relation to Polybius, who is Livy’s only surviving source and provides the most important key we have to understanding the Roman’s working methods. Livy’s history of Rome from its beginning to the reign of the Emperor Augustus does not survive for the period after 167 BC (although there are later summaries of the lost books), but there are many events for which we have the parallel texts of both authors and can see what Livy has done with his Polybian source material.

The famous story of C. Popillius Laenas’ intervention in 168 BC to prevent the Seleucid King Antiochus IV from annexing Egypt will

serve as an example. The text of Polybius first (29.26–27):

26. Forgetful of all he had written and spoken, Antiochus was making preparations for war with Ptolemy, so that what Simonides said seems to be very true: “it is hard to be good.” It is indeed easy to be disposed to act honourably and to strive to do so up to a certain point, but to be consistent and under every circumstance to be steadfast in our purpose, regarding nothing of higher importance than justice and honour, is difficult.

27. [Antiochos having come to Ptolemy with the intention of occupying Pelusium], when Antiochos greeted Gaius Popillius Laenas, the Roman commander, from a distance and held out his right hand, Popilius handed him the tablet he had with him, containing the the decision of the senate, and told him to read it first, deciding, it seems to me, not to make the conventional sign of friendship before finding out Antiochos’ disposition, whether he was friendly or hostile. But when the king, after reading it, said he would like to confer with his courtiers about this news, Popillius acted in a manner thought to be offensive and exceedingly arrogant. He was carrying a stick of vine-wood and with this drew a circle round Antiochos, and ordered him to respond to the communication before leaving the circle. The king was astonished at this overbearing behaviour, but, after a few moments’ hesitation, agreed to all the Roman demands. At this, Popillius and his whole suite all grasped him by the hand and greeted him warmly. The decree ordered him to put an end at once to the war with Ptolemy. He was given a fixed number of days to do this, and so led his army back to Syria, depressed and complaining, but yielding for the moment to circumstances. Popillius, after arranging matters in Alexandria and urging the kings to cooperate, ordered them to send Polyaratus to Rome, and then sailed for Cyprus, wishing to expel the forces on the island with speed. When he arrived, finding that Ptolemy’s general had been defeated in battle and that the affairs of Cyprus were in confusion, he swiftly made the army retire from the country and waited until the troops took ship for Syria. In this way the Romans saved the kingdom of Ptolemy which had been all but overwhelmed, Fortune having adjudicated the affairs of Perseus and Macedonia in such a way that when the position of Alexandria and the whole of Egypt was desperate, all was again set right as a result of the fate of Perseus being decided first. For if this had not happened and had not been known for certain, it seems to me that Antiochus would not have obeyed the Roman commands.

After the expiry of the period granted for a truce, the naval commanders of Antiochus sailed to Pelusium, at the mouth of the Nile, while he himself set out through the Arabian desert, and, after being welcomed by the inhabitants of Memphis and by the rest of the Egyptians—partly because of sympathy with his cause and partly through fear—he came down to Alexandria by a series of short marches. After he had crossed the river at Eleusis, a place four miles from Alexandria, he was met by the Roman commissioners. As they approached, the king greeted them and stretched out his right hand to Popilius; whereupon Popilius handed him the tablets containing the Senate's resolution in writing, and bade him read this before doing anything else. After reading the decree Antiochus said he would summon his friends and consult with them about his course of action; at which Popilius, in keeping with his general acerbity of temper, drew a circle round the king with the rod he carried in his hand and said: "Before you move out of this circle, give me an answer to report to the senate." The king hesitated for a moment, astounded by the violence of the command; then he replied: "I shall do what the Senate decrees." Not until then did Popilius hold out his hand to the king as to an ally and friend. Antiochus then withdrew from Egypt by the appointed day, and the commissioners confirmed by their authority the agreement settled between the brothers; the Romans then sailed to Cyprus, and from there sent away the fleet of Antiochus, which had already won a battle over the Egyptian ships. The commission achieved high renown among the nations, because Egypt had undoubtedly been taken away from Antiochus when he was in possession of that country, and the ancestral throne had been restored to Ptolemy. (Penguin trans., H. Bettenson)

For the central part of this story Livy has done little more than transpose Polybius' version into Latin, not line by line, but not straying very far. So what does Polybius have that Livy does not?

First, Polybius has an introduction (not included in the quotation) to the scene in Egypt, which covers at some length the series of debates held by the Achaean League about whether they should respond positively to Egypt's request for military assistance against Antiochus (29.23–25). Livy was not interested in this and left it out, because, as he might have calculated, nothing came of the Achaean discussions: he just wanted to tell the story of Popillius Laenas. Polybius, on the other hand, not only had a vested interest in Achaean politics, but also wanted to illustrate the power relationship between

the Greek politicians and Rome. For him this was part of the process of history flowing in one stream, and was thus important evidence in support of his interpretation of “universal” history. In the end, as we saw in [chapter 4](#), Callicrates and Andronidas, the pro-Roman leaders, enrolled the authority of Q. Marcius Philippus; his request that the Achaeans follow Roman policy in trying to make peace in Egypt put an end to the Achaean discussions. It is not really a matter of one or other historian producing a “better” version, but it is revealing of Polybius’ concerns and methods to observe that Livy has left this out.

Second, Polybius also includes a short section on the morality of Antiochus’ plans, reminding the reader of Simonides’ maxim that “it is difficult to be good” (29.26). It is easy to think about being good but very difficult to regard nothing more important than justice and honor. This sort of comment is characteristic of Polybius, but not of Livy, who leaves it out.

Third, when we come to the Popillius episode itself, although there is very little difference, the Livian account again shows up some of Polybius’ characteristic tendencies (it should be noted that although the beginning in Polybius seems to be much shorter, this is almost certainly because the Byzantine excerptor has left out the details we read in Livy’s account of Antiochus’ journey to Pelusium). Polybius explains more. Livy does not consider it necessary, for instance, to comment on why Popillius refuses to accept Antiochus’ hand immediately. Livy admits Popillius’ bad temper, but is not as insistent as Polybius on his rudeness and arrogance. After the scene itself, Livy wants to move on rapidly and compresses Polybius, leaving out any talk of Antiochus’ grumbling or Fate and the importance of the timing of Perseus’ defeat at the battle of Pydna.

This mixture of close adaptation, abridgment, omission, and recasting is typical of the ways in which Livy uses Polybius. It tells us more about Livy than Polybius, but when you repeat the examination over many of their parallel accounts, it serves to highlight the interests and methods of Polybius that we studied in [chapter 2](#). What we would really like to know, but cannot, is how Polybius adapted *his* written sources. Perhaps the most important thing for Polybius’ future fate as a writer was the endorsement that Livy’s extensive use of him provided. His judgment that Polybius should not be ignored could just be a way of expressing his approval, but perhaps it could also be taken as a hint that he had indeed been ignored up to that point. Now, as Livy’s “discovery,” his future was brighter.

Constantinople

As we move on into late antiquity and early Byzantine times, Polybius’ work fades somewhat from the collective memory. There is knowledge

of him—Eusebius, Ammianus, Jerome, Orosius, Procopius, and Agathias mention him, but only briefly. At the beginning of the sixth century AD, however, there appears to be one startling exception to this relative obscurity: Count Zosimus of Constantinople opens his history of the Roman empire (from Augustus at least as far as AD 410, when the text breaks off) with a reference to Polybius (1.1):

When Polybius of Megalopolis proposed to write the history of all the remarkable occurrences of his own times, he thought it proper to demonstrate by facts that the Romans, who were continually at war with the neighbouring states for six hundred years after the building of their city, acquired in that space of time no considerable extent of dominion. But after they had subdued a small part of Italy, which upon the invasion of Hannibal they lost at the battle of Cannae, and viewed their enemies under their own walls, they made such great progress in good fortune that in less than fifty-three years they became masters, not only of all Italy and Africa, but likewise of Spain. And being still desirous to enlarge their empire, they crossed the Ionian sea, conquered Greece, and ruined the Macedonians, whose king they carried to Rome in chains. No person can therefore suppose that all this proceeded from causes merely human, but either from fatal necessity, the influence of the planets, or the will of the Deity, which regards with favour all our actions, while they are just and virtuous. For these provide for future contingencies by such a train of apparent causes, that thinking persons must conclude the administration of human affairs to be in the hands of a divine Providence; so that when the energy of nations by the divine influence is roused and alert, they flourish in prosperity; and on the contrary, when they become displeasing to the gods, their affairs decline to a state resembling that which now exists.

Zosimus sets himself up, at the end of Roman history, so to speak, as the historian of Rome's decline, just as Polybius was of its rise: "for as Polybius informs us by what means the Romans in a short space of time attained a vast empire, it is my purpose to show on the other hand that by their ill management in as short a time they lost it" (1.57). With Polybius standing as the very first word of Zosimus' work, we might expect a history shot through with Polybian thought and method. It has been argued, however, that Polybius' influence on Zosimus' thinking and approach seems to be nonexistent, and Zosimus may not even have read his work (or, at least, not beyond the opening chapters).

Although, as Arnaldo Momigliano emphasized, "the story of Polybius in Constantinople has never been told"—in the sense of any

detailed study of his influence on Byzantine thought and history writing—it is to Constantinople that we owe the survival of Polybius' text (the earliest manuscript, containing books 1–5, dates to the tenth century). In another way, however, Constantinople can also be seen to have done a disservice to the cause of Polybius, because, although most of his entire work was probably still extant in the tenth century, at that time the trend toward excerpting and anthologizing took off and was ultimately responsible for the severely fragmentary form in which the text of Polybius has come down to the present day. Better half a loaf than none at all, it might be argued, but Constantinople probably had the whole loaf and left us only slices.

It is not completely clear why the first five books survived intact, but it probably reflects the Byzantine interest in the history of empires. The rise of Rome from a peninsular power to one which united all Mediterranean history in one stream by the end of book 5 might be enough to explain the preservation of the story to that point. The *Ancient Excerpts* (*Excerpta Antiqua*), which contain the surviving parts of books 6–18, was a collection based on the selection of one person, perhaps in the tenth century. Books 1–5 were also excerpted in the same collection, but due to the continuing survival and popularity of the full text, only one manuscript from the *Ancient Excerpts* preserves parts of these first five books. From book 6 to 18, on the other hand, the *Ancient Excerpts* seem to have collected enough of that part of Polybius for Byzantine tastes, leading to the loss of the full text. The last part of our manuscript tradition was formed when the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913–959) ordered that a collection of the best parts of all the main historians extant in Constantinople be made under fifty-three subject titles, of which six survive: *On Virtues and Vices* (*de Virtutibus et Vitiis*), *On Aphorisms* (*de Sententiis*), *On Ambushes* (*de Insidiis*), *On Stratagems* (*de Stratagematis*), *On Foreign Embassies to Rome* (*de Legationibus Gentium ad Romanos*), and *On Roman Embassies Abroad* (*de Legationibus Romanorum ad Gentes*). These, known as the *Constantinean Excerpts*, give us virtually all the surviving text we have of books 20–39 (they contain nothing of books 17, 19, 26, 37, and 40). We must assume again that Byzantine scholars were satisfied with what the *Constantinian Excerpts* preserved of the last twenty-two books of Polybius, thus sadly ensuring that the full text disappeared.

The Modern World

Polybius was rediscovered in the West by Leonardo Bruni in the early fifteenth century. The evidence is provided by Bruni's history of the

First Punic War, based on (rather than translated from) Polybius book 1 and the beginning of book 2, and published in Florence in 1419. Bruni saw Polybius as a reliable source of information on Roman Republican history: "in the commentary which you have read," he wrote to Cardinal Colonna, "I have followed Polybius of Megalopolis, assuredly a great man and outstanding writer, and of the highest authority among the Greeks." Polybius' reputation received its most important boost, however, when Pope Nicholas V ordered a Latin translation of the greatest Greek historians, Polybius among them. Niccolò Perotti carried out the task in 1454, and his translation of books 1–5 remained for a century, in Momigliano's words, the "vehicle by means of which Polybius circulated in Europe."

As we have already observed, Polybius' main reputation in the modern world, not just as a source for ancient history, but as a political theorist whose work could have contemporary relevance, rests on what he says about the Roman state in book 6. The first person to treat this seriously and incorporate it into his own political thought was Macchiavelli in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* (published posthumously; he died in 1527). In this study of republicanism and the modern lessons about it that could be drawn from Roman history, Macchiavelli does not actually name Polybius, and he could not read Greek; so, with Perotti's Latin translation only covering books 1–5, the precise means of his acquaintance with the sixth book of Polybius is not known. The fact of it, however, cannot be doubted. Although Macchiavelli's classification of constitutions into three good types and three degenerate equivalents could just as easily come from Aristotle as Polybius, his description of the degeneration of the three forms (1.2.3–4) can only be a borrowing from book 6 of Polybius:

Chance has given birth to these different kinds of governments amongst men; for at the beginning of the world the inhabitants were few in number, and lived for a time dispersed, like beasts. As the human race increased, the necessity for uniting themselves for defence made itself felt; the better to attain this object, they chose the strongest and most courageous from amongst themselves and placed him at their head, promising to obey him. Thence they began to know the good and the honest, and to distinguish them from the bad and vicious; for seeing a man injure his benefactor aroused at once two sentiments in every heart, hatred against the ingrate and love for the benefactor. They blamed the first, and on the contrary honored those the more who showed themselves grateful, for each felt that he in turn might be subject to a like wrong; and to prevent similar evils, they set to

work to make laws, and to institute punishments for those who contravened them. Such was the origin of justice. This caused them, when they had afterwards to choose a prince, neither to look to the strongest nor bravest, but to the wisest and most just. But when they began to make sovereignty hereditary and non-elective, the children quickly degenerated from their fathers; and, so far from trying to equal their virtues, they considered that a prince had nothing else to do than to excel all the rest in luxury, indulgence, and every other variety of pleasure. The prince consequently soon drew upon himself the general hatred. An object of hatred, he naturally felt fear; fear in turn dictated to him precautions and wrongs, and thus tyranny quickly developed itself. Such were the beginning and causes of disorders, conspiracies, and plots against the sovereigns, set on foot, not by the feeble and timid, but by those citizens who, surpassing the others in grandeur of soul, in wealth, and in courage, could not submit to the outrages and excesses of their princes. Under such powerful leaders the masses armed themselves against the tyrant, and, after having rid themselves of him, submitted to these chiefs as their liberators. These, abhorring the very name of prince, constituted themselves a new government; and at first, bearing in mind the past tyranny, they governed in strict accordance with the laws which they had established themselves; preferring public interests to their own, and to administer and protect with greatest care both public and private affairs. The children succeeded their fathers, and ignorant of the changes of fortune, having never experienced its reverses, and indisposed to remain content with this civil equality, they in turn gave themselves up to cupidity, ambition, libertinage, and violence, and soon caused the aristocratic government to degenerate into an oligarchic tyranny, regardless of all civil rights. They soon, however, experienced the same fate as the first tyrant; the people, disgusted with their government, placed themselves at the command of whoever was willing to attack them, and this disposition soon produced an avenger, who was sufficiently well seconded to destroy them. The memory of the prince and the wrongs committed by him being still fresh in their minds, and having overthrown the oligarchy, the people were not willing to return to the government of a prince. A popular government was therefore resolved upon, and it was so organized that the authority should not again fall into the hands of a prince or a small number of nobles. And as all governments are at first looked up to with some degree of reverence, the popular state also maintained itself for a time, but which was never of long duration, and lasted generally only about

as long as the generation that had established it; for it soon ran into that kind of license which inflicts injury upon public as well as private interests. Each individual only consulted his own passions, and a thousand acts of injustice were daily committed, so that, constrained by necessity, or directed by the counsels of some good man, or for the purpose of escaping from this anarchy, they returned anew to the government of a prince, and from this they generally lapsed again into anarchy, step by step, in the same manner and from the same causes as we have indicated.

Such is the circle which all republics are destined to run through. (Trans. C. E. Detmold 1882)

Having established the “cycle” of constitutions, Macchiavelli then continues to follow Polybius for a short time in presenting the mixed form as the way to escape the cycle and establish the perfect constitution; after that, he brings into play for his argument the rest of the history of the Roman Republic, obviously moving out of the period covered by Polybius.

What is important about this work for our purposes is that it was not a study of ancient history: Macchiavelli was not writing a history of Rome using Polybius (among others) as a source. He was writing a work of contemporary political science, in which, as Fergus Millar has emphasized, “Roman past and Italian present are brought into constant dialogue with each other.” The conclusions he was drawing about the Roman Republic were geared toward a better understanding and better practice of contemporary politics. Those conclusions were startling and controversial. We need not linger on the details, but in brief he regarded the strife and conflicts of the Republic as, paradoxically, the very source of Rome’s freedom, stability, and power. Aristocratic “guardianship” of the state within a mixed system could lead to the longer maintenance of peaceful stability, as in Sparta and Venice, but it was not designed for expansion. For that you needed the guardianship to rest with the people, as at Rome.

The role of Polybius’ sixth book in the *Discourses* is not extensive—what is important for Macchiavelli is the whole story of the Roman Republic, for which Polybius is only a relatively minor source—but its presence there at all ensured that Polybius now took his place alongside more famous names, like Aristotle, Livy, and Cicero, and became part and parcel of the debates of modern political theorists. It should be noted in passing that his careful description of the Roman military system in book 6 also aroused considerable interest in the sixteenth century. This interest received its most influential expression in Justus Lipsius’ *Five Books on the Roman Army. A Commentary on Polybius* (1595), a work that heavily influenced the military reforms of

Maurice of Nassau, who rescued the Netherlands from Spanish domination at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

It was, however, the cycle of constitutions, the mixed form of the constitution and the description of how it worked, that filtered their way into modern constitutional theory. Book 6 of Polybius is one of the ancient works that inform that part of the modern debate on republicanism that moved from mixed government, to checks and balances, to the separation of powers. The theme of mixed government runs, in various ways, through the Florentine school of Macchiavelli, Guicciardini, and Giannotti into both the English tradition represented particularly by Thomas Hobbes, James Harrington, and Richard Moyle, and the French of Rousseau and Montesquieu, and on into by far the greatest modern debate on government—that among the founders of the Constitution of the United States and their opponents. The nature of the classical contribution to that debate has been a matter of some disagreement: was it formative of thought or merely illustrative? To a certain extent this has depended on different political situations and individuals. Some English thinkers seem to have looked to the past as a validation of their own system with complacent satisfaction. For example, Joseph Addison, writing in 1712:

I could never read a Passage in *Polybius*, and another in *Cicero*, to this purpose, without a secret Pleasure in applying it to the *English* constitution, which it suits much better than the *Roman*. Both these great Authors give the Pre-eminence to a mixt Government, consisting of three branches, the Regal, the Noble, and the Popular. They had doubtless in their Thoughts the Constitution of the *Roman* Commonwealth, in which the Consul represented the King, the Senate the Nobles, and the Tribunes the People.

An easy familiarity with Cicero and Polybius seems only to have assisted Addison, on this occasion, in illustrating features of the English constitution.

The same can hardly be said for the incomparably greater Montesquieu, whose thinking was permeated by the classical past. In a famous chapter (11.6) of his *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), he identifies the importance of the “separation of powers” and the principle of “checks and balances”, strangely, perhaps, deriving them from the English constitution rather than from antiquity. I say “strangely” because a few chapters later (11.12–18), he analyzes at some length the development of the Roman Republican constitution, basing himself very largely on Polybius’ description of how it worked (and actually citing Polybius in chapter 17), yet not connecting modern

practice with what he read there. It is true that in Polybius, Plato, or Aristotle, there is no clear notion of the separation of powers, in the modern sense of recognizing the need for separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government; but Polybius does assign clear functions to each of the three units of the mixed constitution of Rome (if not neatly describable as legislative, executive, and judicial) and certainly sees them as exercising a set of checks and balances on each other. Although he does not seem to recognize it, Montesquieu's separation of powers can certainly be seen as the heir to Polybius' ideas. The governments of antiquity were only part of the extraordinary range of regimes, institutions, and laws Montesquieu covered in *The Spirit of the Laws*, the overall purpose of which is not altogether clear; but it is clear that understanding the Roman Republic was a fundamental requirement for any discussion of republicanism.

Polybius' place in the remarkable Federalist papers—the eighty-five articles written between October 1787 and August 1788 by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in support of the proposed constitution of the United States—is marginal. He is mentioned by name in *Federalist* no. 63, written by James Madison, as the source of his information on the Carthaginian senate's loss of power to the people (presumably referring to Polybius 6.51.6–8); Polybius' analysis in book 6 of the respective roles of senate and people seems to lie behind all of Madison's insistence on the need for a senate “as an anchor against popular fluctuations.” *Federalist* nos. 15–20 deal with what Hamilton and Madison regarded as the inadequacies of the existing American confederacy; to support their argument they offer a long review of the failures of previous confederacies. Included in this is Madison's exposition of the Achaean League (no. 18), for which Polybius is the main source. Although this was just an illustrative use of Polybius, it was obviously of vital importance to the Federalists to prove the worth of central government over confederacy; examples, whether from antiquity or more recent times, were crucial for making the case. Madison justified his coverage of the Achaean League on the grounds that “it emphatically illustrates the tendency of federal bodies rather to anarchy among the members than to tyranny in the head.”

The most important contribution of Polybius' work to the constitutional discourse arose from his role as one of the great classical exponents of mixed government. Although not an obvious choice of governmental structure for the American people, who had neither king nor titled aristocracy, mixed government was a central idea both in the constitutions of the individual states and in the federal constitution. The governor of a state, or the president, would fulfill the monarchic role. The aristocratic would be in the hands of a

senate (state or national), made up of what the English theorist James Harrington conceived of as the “natural aristocracy,” men of particular talent, birth and wealth. The people would be represented by a popular assembly. John Adams, whose words are quoted at the beginning of this epilogue, was the most fervent admirer of mixed government theory. He thought the best exponents of it were the ancients, particularly Polybius, not so much modern thinkers like Macchiavelli, Harrington, or Montesquieu. His *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787), which contains an extensive review of republics of different types, places and ages, including two whole sections on Polybius (Letters 30 and 31), is, very largely, a defense of mixed government, tempered by the modern developments of representative politics and the separation of powers. The same advocacy of mixed government will be found in James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, James Wilson, and many others involved in the exciting process of founding the new nation. The particular and brilliant mixture and form of government they devised are beyond the scope of this book to discuss. But we can say this: as Carl Richard has shown, virtually all the participants were so deeply steeped in the classical past that it was an integral part of the way they lived and thought. The writers and history of classical antiquity formed the starting point for a great many of the momentous deliberations that led to the writing of the American Constitution—to a perhaps extraordinary extent in the history of nations, the founders sought to incorporate the lessons of the past in their new constitutional venture. Polybius was one of the ancient team of writers who made a significant contribution to that venture.

This was probably the high point of Polybius’ posthumous career among politicians and political scientists. From the end of the eighteenth century, he began to take a more sedate position within the groves of classical scholarship, while retaining, to be sure, his republican reputation in political science circles. From 1789 to 1795, Schweighäuser produced the first great academic commentary on Polybius, not surpassed until that of Walbank in the twentieth century (1957–1979). Although Polybius is hardly a staple of university classics courses, probably because of his lack of stylistic elegance, he has for some time been secure in his standing as one of the great historians of antiquity. And there we might leave him, but for a remarkable (if controversial) book that was published in 2000 by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Entitled *Empire*, one thing it certainly demonstrates (and there would be many more that are disputed) is the vitality and capacity Polybius’ *Histories* still has to stimulate original theoretical thinking in the field of political science.

At the core of Hardt and Negri’s book is a reconfiguration of

globalization, a new analysis of the political, financial, and even cultural structures of the world. They summarize their case at the very beginning (p. xi):

Empire is materializing before our very eyes. Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule—in short a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.

One of the main symptoms of this new world order is the declining sovereignty of the nation-states: “our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms under a single logic of rule” (p. xii). I pass over large tracts of argumentation here, but it is with these new organisms that Polybius enters the scene. In a chapter (3.5) symptomatically titled “Mixed Constitution,” the authors model the new world structures explicitly on Polybius (pp. 314–16, where they postdate Polybius to the imperial period, thus assigning the monarchic element of the mixed constitution to the emperor rather than to the republican consuls). The monarchic principle of empire, “the first and highest tier of unified global command” (p. 310), is now represented by the military power of the United States and its allies, by the financial power of the small group of nation-states that control “the primary global monetary instruments” (through the World Trade Organization, for instance, or the G8 or G15 group of nations), and by the cultural power of this military and financial group. The aristocratic element, the second tier of Hardt and Negri’s pyramid of empire, is formed by the multinational corporations, which operate under the umbrella and protection of the first tier of global power, and to a lesser extent by the “general set of sovereign nation-states,” who are often subordinated to the multinationals, but who “capture and distribute the flows of wealth to and from the global power, and discipline their own populations, as much as this is still possible” (p. 310). At the bottom of the pyramid of power, the democratic principle of mixed government is manifested in various representative organizations across the globe. The United Nations General Assembly is one of these, but more important are nongovernmental bodies—the media and the religious institutions to a certain extent, but most significantly, in recent times, the huge network of groups known as

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as human rights and relief agencies (Amnesty International, Oxfam, etc.).

To what extent this application of the Polybian model has validity is not my present task to assess. I merely want to draw attention to a strikingly original use of Polybius by two modern theoreticians. That this sudden reemergence of Polybius into the light of modern theory might not be, like Andrisus in 150 BC, a bolt from the blue—as Polybius himself said, “dropped from the sky” (36.10)—is suggested by one of the responses to Hardt and Negri. In a recent article, David Inglis and Roland Robertson (2006) offer a critique of *Empire*’s employment of Polybius. Their main point of attack is what they regard as the inapplicable *political* analogy between the world in which Polybius lived and the present global world: how, for instance, can multinationals be compared to the Roman senate? Rather than simply dismiss Polybius, however, they argue for a historiographical rather than political use of his work. In the way he visualized the world as “an organic whole,” history flowing into one, Roman stream; in his development of “universal history” as the only satisfactory way to represent this organic whole; and in the way he organized his presentation, his “weaving” of events in different geographical locations into a single cloth, Polybius “should be seen as a foundational figure for modern attempts to grasp global processes and phenomena.” In other words, what is useful for understanding the modern world is not so much the details of Polybius, as his wider vision and how he presented it: it is only now, not in the 140th Olympiad as Polybius maintained, that the world is becoming an organic whole; only now is universal history the right way to depict it.

Polybius had a particular (and particularly interesting) understanding of how his world worked, and he devised an original and carefully structured means to explain it. Like Thucydides before him, he hoped, above all, that this explanation would prove useful to present and future generations. With classical scholars still poring over it, and political scientists incorporating it into contemporary thinking, he could hardly be disappointed. His *Histories* was not a masterpiece of literary style, although it was constructed with greater artistry than is usually recognized, and over the ages it suffered serious losses, so that it has come to the modern world in diminished and fragmentary form. Even burdened with these imperfections, it has retained its fascination as a story of imperial rise (and decline) and its ability to stimulate imaginative responses.

Further Reading

Brunt (1980) is an important analysis of the challenges of interpreting fragments and summaries of ancient authors; on this topic, see also Pelling (2000). Modern bibliography on subjects I have briefly touched on here—for instance, anything to do with the thinking of the founding fathers of the U.S. Constitution—is vast. I claim no expertise in these fields and merely cite works I found particularly informative. By far the fullest analysis of the reception of Polybius, from classical antiquity to the modern world, is provided in two articles of the great Italian scholar Arnaldo Momigliano on which I have relied heavily: Momigliano (1974a) and Momigliano (1974b, from which I have taken the citation of Bruni's letter to Cardinal Colonna). Livy's use of Polybius has been extensively studied, most thoroughly in Tränkle (1978); English speakers will find useful Luce (1977, 196–221). For the assessment of the minimal influence exerted by Polybius on Zosimus, see Paschoud (1974). The details of the Polybian manuscript tradition are set out in Moore (1965). For Polybius in the modern age, Fergus Millar's (2002) study of the influence of the Roman Republic on political thought contains a great deal of helpful and interesting coverage. Pocock (1975) is the most important starting point for the period from Macchiavelli to the founding fathers, ground also covered most engagingly in Nelson (2004). The monumental study of republics, ancient and modern, by Rahe (1994), is standard. Crucial to our understanding of the classical influences on the founding fathers is Richard (1994). The *Federalist* papers are handily available in Penguin Classics. Manin (1994) I found helpful on checks and balances. For *Empire* and the response to which I have referred, see Hardt and Negri (2000) and Inglis and Robertson (2006) (which has a helpful bibliography).

Appendix: Outline of the Work

Book 1

1–5	Introduction
1–3.6	General introduction: theme, plan; starting in Ol. 140.
3.7–5.5	Introduction to first two books (<i>prokataskeue</i>); starting in Ol. 129.
6–12	Italy and Sicily and background to the First Punic War Starts with sack of Rome 387/386 B.C. Roman expansion against Latins, Etruscans, Celts, Samnites. Tarentum and Pyrrhus.
13–64	The First Punic War
13–15	Summary of introductory books and reasons for detailed coverage of First Punic War; correction of Philinus and Fabius Pictor.
16–20	Siege of Agrigentum and consequences of its capture for war as a whole.
21–28	Development of Roman fleet and first naval engagements. Roman victory at Ecnomus (26–28).
29–36	Regulus in Africa: from victory to defeat; role of the Spartan Xanthippus; lessons of Regulus' reversal of fortune (35); return home of Xanthippus; rescue of Rome's African survivors.
37–41	Storms. Roman victory at Panormos.
41–61	Action centered on Roman siege of Lilybaeum. Geography of Sicily (42). Punic victory at Drepana (49–52). Stalemate (57–59). Final battle (60–61).
62–64	Peace terms, summary, and judgment on war.
65–88	The Libyan War (Carthage versus her mercenaries)
65–72	Reasons for narrating the war. Causes of the war; detailed account of its beginning.
73–87	Narrative of Libyan War. Sardinian mercenaries revolt and murder all Carthaginians on the island (79). Crime of Mathos and Spendios; medical analogy

Book 2

1.1–4	Introduction	Summary of book 1.
1.5–9	Spain	Carthaginian expansion under Hamilcar.
2–12	The First Illyrian War 231–228 BC	
	2–4	Aetolians besiege Medion and are punished for their pride.
	5–7	Illyrian expedition against Elis and Messenia. Affair of Phoenice: treachery of the Gauls, stupidity of the Eleans. Lesson of history.
	8–12	Queen Teuta; murder of Roman envoy. Illyrian treaty with Rome.
13	Spain	Rome worried about growth of Carthaginian power but preoccupied by Celts. Treaty: Carthaginians not to cross the River Ebro in arms.
14–35	Rome versus Celts of North Italy	
14–17	Geography and resources of Cisalpine Gaul.	
18	Sack of Rome 387/386 BC.	
22	Rome distracted by Celts from the more urgent matter of Spain.	
27–31	Roman victory at battle of Telamon, 225 BC.	
35	Summary of Celtic war: number, desperation, and daring of combatants, but poor planning and judgment. Lessons of history: no need to fear hordes of barbarians.	
36	Spain	Hannibal takes command. Carthaginians want revenge for Sicilian defeat. War

37–70	History of Greece before Olympiad 140	inevitable.
	37	Important historical considerations. Jusification for introductory treatment of Achaea and Macedon; no need to do the same for Egypt and Asia.
	38–44	Origins, institutions, and early history of the Achaean League.
	45–70	The Cleomenean War, 229–222 BC. Origins of the war (45–46). Phylarchus and Aratus as sources; unreliability of Phylarchus (56–63); purposes and nature of history.
71	Summary of Introductory Books	

Book 3

1–5	Introduction
	Introduction to the history proper.
	Summary of main events to be covered.
	Change of plan to include 167–146 BC (4).
	Period of disturbance (5).
6–33	Causes and beginnings of the Second Punic War
6–7	Important discussion of causes, pretexts, beginnings.
8–12	Causes (indignation of Hamilcar; Roman treatment of Carthage after first war; success of Carthage in Spain). Fabius Pictor wrong. Hostility of the Barcids (11–12).
13–20	Beginnings of the war. Events in Spain and Illyria.
22–28	History of the treaties between Rome and Carthage.
29–30	Responsibility for the war.
31–32	Importance of cause and value of universal history.
33–59	Hannibal's march to Italy
33–35	Carthaginian troop dispositions. Hannibal marches to the Rhône.
36–39	Geographical methodology. Distances of Hannibal's march.
40–46	Hannibal crosses the Rhône. Roman actions.

47–48	Geography of the Alps; correction of previous dramatic writing.
49–56	Hannibal crosses the Alps.
57–59	Geographical excursus. Polybius' journeys for the correction of previous writers.
60–75	Hannibal in the Po Valley
60–65	Preliminaries and battle of Ticinus.
66–75	Preliminaries and battle of the Trebia.
76	Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio in Spain
77–94	The Trasimene campaign
77–78	Hannibal and the Celts.
79	Hannibal's dangerous march to Etruria.
80–82	Theme of Flaminius' rashness and Hannibal's exploitation of it. Qualities of a victorious general.
83–84	The battle.
85–94	The aftermath. Fabius' delaying tactics.
95–99	Events in Spain
100–105	Minucius versus Fabius Theme of Minucius' desire to fight, Fabius' to avoid battle. Fabius wins out.
106–117	The Cannae campaign
108–9	Speech of Aemilius.
111	Speech of Hannibal.
112	Excitement in Rome.
115–17	The battle.
118	Summary. Romans stay calm and recover quickly.

Book 4

1–2	Introduction Transition from books 1–3 and introduction. Starting date discussed: change of political leaders in Ol. 140.
3–37	The Social War, 220–219 BC
3–13	Causes: youth of Philip V leads Aetolians into aggression. Dorimachus and Scopas (3–5). Aratus (8). Cause, pretext, beginning summarized (13).
14–26	Preliminaries and outbreak. Music, Cynaetha, and the Arcadians (20–21). Philip and Achaeans decide on war (25).
27–37	Opening. Scopas elected Aetolian general (27). <i>Synchronism 1</i> (27–28). Situation in Aetolia, Macedon, Acarnania, Epirus, Messene, Sparta. <i>Synchronism 2</i> (37).
38–52	War of Rhodes and Bithynia versus Byzantium
38–46	Geography and resources of the Black Sea (38–42). Position and history of Byzantium (43–46).

47–49	Causes of war (Rhodes' response to Byzantine control of trade through the Bosphorus) and allies. Grievances of Prusias of Bithynia.
50–52	War.
53–55	Crete Local rivalries. Cnossus and Gortyn ask help from Aetolians; other Cretans send to Philip and Achaeans.
56	Mithradates III of Pontus versus Sinope Sinope, under threat of Pontic attack, appeals to Rhodians, who send help. Geography of Sinope.
57–87	The Social War, 219–218 BC
57–60	Situation in Peloponnese. Aetolian attack on Aegeira. Criticism of Aratos' leadership.
61–73	Campaigns of Philip: Aetolia (61–66); <i>synchronism 3</i> (66–67); Peloponnese (67–73).
73–75	Peaceful life and immunity in Elis.
76	Apelles, scheming courtier of Philip, introduced. Apelles versus Aratus.
77	Assessment of Philip's character.
78–87	Apelles story interlinked with Social War. Apelles secures election of Eperatus as Achaean general (82). Apelles' attempts to undermine Aratus.

Book 5

1–30	The Social War, 218–217 BC
1–8	Apelles' story. <i>Synchronism 4</i> (1). Plot of Apelles, Leontius, and Megaleas against Philip (2). Intrigues of Leontius: Palus, Messene, Philip's advance to Thermum (4–7).
9–12	Assessment of Philip's actions at Thermum.
13–16	Apelles' story. Megaleas and Leontius at banquet (14). Megaleas and Crinon fined and tried (15–16).
17–24	Peloponnesian campaign of Philip. Speed of Philip.
25–29	Apelles' story. Geography of Sparta (21–22). <i>Synchronism 5</i> (29).
31–33	Methodology. Social War nearly over, but Olympiad year system requires treatment of Asian affairs; importance of beginnings; universal history.
34–87	The East. The Fourth Syrian War, 219–217 BC

34–40		Egypt background. Indolence of Ptolemy IV leads to conspiracies (34). First conspiracy Cleomenes (35–39): Cleomenes held in Egypt; Sosibius versus Cleomenes; Cleomenes attempts to break out, dies bravely. Second conspiracy: Theodotus plans to hand Coele-Syria to Antiochus III (40).
	40–57	Syria background. Revolt of Molon and Alexander. Antiochus versus Molon; Hermeias versus Epigenes; Achaeus versus Antiochus. Hermeias murdered.
	58–87	War. Geography of Seleucia (59). Activity of Antiochus (58–62); preparations of Ptolemy (62–65). Achaeus (72–77). Attalus (77–78). Raphia campaign (79–87).
88–90	Rhodian earthquake, c. 227 BC	
		Contributions of cities, kings, and princes to the damaged city.
91–105	The Social War, 217–216 BC	Campaign narrative. Demetrius of Pharos feeds Philip’s western ambitions (101). “Cloud in the west” speech of Agelaus (104). Confluence of Mediterranean affairs. <i>Synchronism 6</i> (105).
106–111	Rest of Greek history up to battle of Cannae	Rapid summary of situation in Peloponnese, Athens, Egypt, Syria, Aetolia, Macedon, Bithynia. <i>Synchronism 7</i> (108). <i>Synchronism 8</i> (109). Roman constitution to be subject of book 6.

Book 6 The Roman State

2	Introduction Chief cause of a state’s success or failure
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3–4	is its constitution. Types of constitution Primitive monarchy + kingship (tyranny), aristocracy (oligarchy), democracy (mob rule) + mixed.
4–9	The cycle of constitutions (<i>anakyklosis</i>) Succession of constitutions and their corruptions; biological analogy of birth, acme, decline.
10	Lycurgus and the Spartan “mixed” constitution.
11a	The “archaeologia” (early history of Rome).
11–18	The Roman constitution in operation. Power of consuls (12), senate (13), people (14); checks on power of consuls (15), of senate (16), of people (17).
19–26	The Roman army.
27–42	The Roman camp.
27–32	Layout.
33–42	Life in camp.
43–56	Comparison of Rome with other states
44	Athens.
45–47	Crete.
48–50	Sparta.
51–56	Carthage. The Roman funeral (53–55).
57–59	Conclusion

Book 7 Olympiad 141,1 and 2 (216/215–215/214 BC)

1	Luxury and extravagance of Capua.
2–5	Hieronymus of Syracuse.
6	Geography of Leontini.
7–8	Criticism of previous writers’ overdramatic presentation of Hieronymus.
9	Treaty of Philip V and Hannibal.
10–14a	Messene and assessment of Philip V.
15–18	Antiochus III captures Sardis.

Book 8 Olympiad 141,3 and 4 (214/213–213/212 BC)

1–2	Preface: scale of Hannibalic war; importance of universal history.
3–7	Siege of Syracuse. Archimedes’ genius.
8	Philip V’s destruction of Messene and criticism of other writers.
9–11	Digression on Theopompus’ account of Philip II of Macedon.
12	Death of Aratus. Philip’s treatment of his advisers.
13–14	Philip captures Lissus.

15–21	Capture of Seleucid pretender Achaeus by Antiochus III.
24–34	Hannibal's capture of Tarentum.
35–36	Betrayal of leaders (Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, Archidamas, Pelopidas, Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio).
37	Roman capture of Syracuse.

Book 9 Olympiad 142, 1 and 2 (212/211–211/210 BC)

1–2	Preface: types of history.
3–9	Roman siege of Capua; Hannibal's march on Rome. Praise of Rome and Carthage for their courage (7). Comparison of Hannibal and Epaminondas (8–9).
10	Were the Romans right to despoil Syracuse?
12–20	On generalship.
22–26	The character of Hannibal: cruelty and avarice.
28–39	Speeches of Chlaeneas the Aetolian and Lyciscus the Acarnanian at Sparta.
43	The River Euphrates.

Book 10 Olympiad 142,3 and 4 (210/209–209/208 BC)

1	Tarentum.
2–20	Character of Scipio Africanus and capture of New Carthage.
21–24	Philopoemen's career and reform of the Achaean cavalry.
26	Deterioration of Philip V's character.
27–31	Antiochus III's expedition versus Arsaces II.
32–33	Death and criticism of the consul M. Claudius Marcellus.
34–40	Spain. Victory of Scipio at battle of Baecula.
41–42	Campaigning of Philip.
43–47	Fire signaling.
48	The River Oxus.
49	Antiochus III in Bactria.

Book 11 Olympiad 143,1 and 2 (208/207–207/206 BC)

1a	Lists of contents (<i>prographai</i>) and surveys (<i>proektheseis</i>).
1–3	Hasdrubal and the battle of the Metaurus.
4–6	Praise of Hasdrubal. Speech of Thrasyrates of Rhodes.

9–10	Speech of Philopoemen and assessment of his way of life.
11–18	Battle of Mantinea.
19a	Importance of causes.
19	Hannibal's generalship praised: kept varied forces together without sedition for sixteen years.
20–24	Victory of Scipio at battle of Ilipa.
25–30	Mutiny in Scipio's army. Medical analogy. Speech of Scipio (28–29).
31–33	Scipio defeats Andobales in Spain.
39	Antiochus III in Bactria.

Book 12 Timaeus of Tauromenium and the Writing of History

I	1–4	Errors of Timaeus on Africa and Corsica. Timaeus' cavilling, ignorance, and pedantry (4a–d).
II	5–23	Polybius' defense of authors criticized by Timaeus. Errors of Timaeus on Locri and superiority of Aristotle (5–11). Timaeus' criticisms of Aristotle, Theophrastus, Callisthenes, Ephorus, Demochares.
III	24–26d	Timaeus not properly qualified to write history. He lacks practical political experience, vital for writing history. Comparison of medicine and history (25d–e).
IV	27a–end	Reasons for Timaeus' technical incompetence.

Book 13 Olympiad 143,3 and 4 (206/205–205/204 BC)

1–2	Aetolian affairs.
3–5	Philip V and Rhodes. Philip addicted to treachery, like other current political leaders (3). Portrait of Heracleides (4).
6–8	Nabis, king of Sparta. Story of his "iron maiden."

Book 14 Olympiad 144,1 (204/203 BC)

1a	Ol. 144 particularly important: wars in Italy and Africa ended; political character
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1–10	and policies of the kings (Philip V and Antiochus III) became clear. Scipio in Africa. Burning of enemy camps. Defeat of Carthaginians at battle of the Great Plains (8).
11–12	Egypt. Not worth giving an account of each year successively: Ptolemy IV led such a dissipated life that one may as well tell it all at once.

Book 15 Olympiad 144,2 (203/202 BC)

1–16	Africa and battle of Zama. Scipio and Hannibal meet and speak (5–8), Polybius moved by the courage of both sides (9).
17–19	Peace terms.
20	Pact of Philip and Antiochus to carve up Egypt.
21–23	Philip and Cius. Stupidity of Cians.
24	Philip's treachery shown by capture of Thasus.
24a–36	Egypt and the downfall of Agathocles. Sensationalism of other writers on the topic (34–36). Digression on Agathocles of Sicily (35).

Book 16 Olympiad 144,3 and 4 (202/201–201/200 BC)

1	Philip attacks Pergamum; destroys temples and altars.
2–9	Battle of Chios. Praise of Theophiliscus (9).
11	Philip's capture of Prinassus.
12	Superstitious beliefs a sign of "childish simplicity," but can contribute to the piety of the masses.
14–20	Criticism of Zeno and Antisthenes.
21–22	Egypt. Character of Tlepolemus.
22a	Syria. Loyalty of Gaza.
23	Italy. Scipio's return to Rome and triumph.
25–26	Greece. Attalus and Romans at Athens.
27–28	Philip's general Nicanor overruns Attica, but ordered to leave by the Romans. Polybius praises Philip.
29–35	Philip besieges Abydos. Geography of the Propontis (29). M. Aemilius Lepidus addresses Philip.
36–37	Philopoemen attacks Nabis.

Book 17 Olympiad 145,1 and 2 (200/199–199/198 BC)

Book 18 Olympiad 145,3 and 4 (198/197–197/196 BC)

1–12	Conference at Locris. Negotiations between Philip and Flamininus.
13–15	What is a traitor? Philip II discussed.
18–33	Battle of Cynoscephalae. Greek and Roman stakes (18). Difference between Greek and Roman phalanx (28–32).
34–39	Aftermath of battle. Roman integrity (35).
41	Obituary of Attalus I of Pergamum.
44–48	Settlement of Greece. Proclamation of Flamininus.
49–52	Asia. Antiochus and Lampsacus.
53–55	Egypt. Fall of Scopas and Dicaearchus. Proclamation of Ptolemy V Epiphanes.

Book 19 Olympiad 146 (196/195–193/192 BC)

Book 20 Olympiad 147,1 (192/191 BC)

4–7	Decline of Boeotia.
9–11	Rome and Aetolians negotiate.

Book 21 Olympiad 147,2-4 (191/190–189/188 BC)

Fragmentary	
11	Antiochus III attempts to win over Prusias of Bithynia.
13–15	Antiochus tries to make peace with Rome.
16–17	Conditions after Antiochus' defeat at the battle of Magnesia.
18–24	Embassies at Rome 189 BC. Speech of Eumenes (19–22).
29–32	Peace settlement of Rome with Aetolians.
33–39	C. Manlius Vulso versus the Galatians (fragments). Story of Chiomara, wife of Ortiagon the Gaul (38).
40–45	Asia. Ariarathes; Manlius Vulso; terms of treaty with Antiochus (43).
46	Settlement of Asia.

Book 22 Olympiad 148 (188/187–185/184 BC)

4	Boeotian troubles: tension between Rome and Achaea.
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5	Dispute between Rhodes and Lycia.
7–10	Achaean affairs, 185 BC. Embassies of Eumenes and Ptolemy; visit of Q. Caecilius Metellus.
11–12	Greek embassies at Rome.
15	Cretan affairs.
16–17	Native revolt in Egypt.
18	Causes of Third Macedonian War: planned by Philip, executed by Perseus.
19	Philopoemen's dispute with Archon. Polybius present.

Book 23 Olympiad 149,1 and 2 (184/183–183/182 BC)

1–4	Greek embassies to Rome 184/183 BC.
5	Deinocrates of Messene: character sketch.
10–11	Start of the disasters for Philip and Macedonia.
12–14	Death of Philopoemen. Character of Philopoemen, Hannibal, and Scipio Aemilianus.
16	Messene surrenders to the Achaeans.
17–18	Sparta rejoins Achaean League.

Book 24 Olympiad 149,3 and 4 (182/181–181/180 BC)

1	Embassies at Rome 182/181 BC.
6	Lycortas, Polybius, and Aratus chosen as envoys of the Achaean League to Ptolemy V Epiphanes, who dies before the embassy goes.
8–10	Policy of the pro-Roman Callicrates.
11–13	Discussion of Greek policy toward Rome. Comparison of Philopoemen and Aristaenus.
14–15	War between Eumenes II of Bithynia and Pharnaces of Pontus.

Book 25 Olympiad 150 (180/179–177/176 BC)

2	Peace between Eumenes II and Pharnaces.
3	Accession of Perseus, king of Macedon.
4–6	Character of early reign. Embassies at Rome.

Book 26 Olympiad 151 (176/175–173/172 BC)

1	Character sketch of Antiochus IV
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Book 27 Olympiad 152,1 and 2 (172/171–171/170 BC)

3	Rhodes supports Rome against Perseus.
4	Perseus and Rhodes.
5	Perseus and Boeotia.
7	Rhodes sends help to Gaius Lucretius.
8	Perseus proposes peace.
9–10	Perseus compared to the boxer Aristonicus and his famous bout with Clitomachus.

Book 28 Olympiad 152,3 (170/169 BC)

1–2	Embassies at Rome.
3–5	Roman envoys in Greece. Popillius to accuse Lycortas, Archon, and Polybius but no grounds for doing so. Lyciscus violently pro-Roman. Pro-Roman party in Acarmania ask for Roman garrisons.
6–7	Discussion of Achaean policy toward Rome and Perseus.
8–11	Perseus' negotiations with Genthius of Illyria.
12–13	Achaean decide to join Roman side. Polybius informs Q. Marcius Philippus.
14–15	Crete. Cydonians looking for alliance with Eumenes.
16–17	Disagreements at Rhodes.
18–23	Sixth Syrian War (Ptolemies versus Seleucids). Wicked Ptolemaic adviser Eulaeus.

Book 29 Olympiad 152,4 (169/168 BC)

3–4	Genthius joins Perseus.
5–9	Intrigues of Eumenes and Perseus; their avarice.
12	History writing: advantages of universal history.
14–18	Aemilius Paullus' campaign and battle of Pydna (fragments).
21	Predictions of Demetrius of Phalerum recalled because of the destruction of Macedon.
27	Ultimatum of C. Popillius Laenas to Antiochus IV at Alexandria.

Book 30 Olympiad 153 (168/167–165/164 BC)

1–5	Pergamene and Rhodian envoys at Rome.
6–9	Classes of anti-Roman statesmen in Greece. Case of Polyaratus and Deinon.
18	Prusias' servile behavior at Rome. Senate refuses to admit Eumenes.
25–26	Games of Antiochus IV at Daphne in 166 BC.
29	Hatred for Callicrates.

Book 31 Olympiad 154 (164/163–161/160 BC)

2	Demetrius to be held in Rome. Senate did not want a vigorous king in Syria; a boy would serve their interests better. Mission of Octavius to damage Seleucid military resources.
6	Worse Rome treated Eumenes, more the Greeks liked him.
10	Disagreement among Ptolemies. Rome wants to divide Egypt to their own advantage; many decisions of Rome now like this.
11–15	Escape of Demetrius from Rome with help of Polybius.
22–30	Aemilius Paullus; establishment of Scipio Aemilianus' reputation for self-control, financial honesty, and courage.

Book 32 Olympiad 155 (160/159–157/156 BC)

2	Demetrius sends Leptines, murderer of Octavius, to Rome.
4	Lyciscus dies and Aetolia more agreeable place thereafter.
5–6	Death of other pro-Roman politicians.
8	Career of Charops in Epirus.
15–16	Obituary of Eumenes II. Bithynia and Pergamon at war.

Book 33 Olympiad 156 (156/155–153/152 BC)

Book 34 Geography

Book 35 Olympiad 157,1 and 2 (152/151–151/150 BC)

Book 36 Olympiad 157,3 and 4 (150/149–149/148 BC)

1	Function of speeches in history.
2	Romans seek pretext for attacking Carthage.
3–6	Negotiations between Rome and Carthage.
9–10	Greek views of Roman treatment of Carthage, and on Andriscus.
12	Polybius on what he calls himself.
14	Story of Roman embassy without feet, head, or heart.
15	Character sketch of Prusias II, very unfavorable.
16	Character sketch of Massinissa, very favorable.
17	Power of Fortune. What cannot be rationally analyzed to be attributed to Fortune; what we can detect (e.g., low birthrate in Greece) must not be put down to the divine.

Book 37 Olympiad 158,1 (148/147 BC)**Book 38 Olympiad 158,2 (147/146 BC)**

1–4	Defeat of the Achaeans and destruction of Corinth worst disaster in Greek history. Polybius compares Xerxes, Spartan defeat by Thebans, destruction of Thebes by Alexander.
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7–8	Polybius criticizes Carthaginian General Hasdrubal.
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Book 39 Olympiad 158,3 (146/145 BC)

5	Polybius' role in the settlement of Greece after the war the most brilliant of his achievements.
8	Conclusion to the work.

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Prominent Persons

Polybius' *Histories* has a huge cast of characters, and the following list is intended as a brief reference guide to some of the most prominent that appear in this book. English custom tends to abbreviate Roman names, and with good reason. The full name, for example, of the Roman general and friend of Polybius who is usually referred to as Scipio Aemilianus, was Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus Africanus Numantinus. I have followed normal practice in using the most familiar parts of a Roman name; this may be both inconsistent and technically incorrect, but it will be clear at all stages (I hope) to which member of a particular family I am referring. I have put Roman names in alphabetical order according to how I have first referred to them (Scipio Africanus under "S," Lucius Aemilius Paullus under "L").

In the ancient world, Greek (or Greek-style) kings often used the same family name, and in many (but not all) cases were distinguished from each other by an additional identifying epithet; modern practice usually adds a numeral for greater clarity. Thus, for example, Ptolemy IV Philopator (literally, "the one who loved his father"), is distinguished from Ptolemy VI Philometor (literally, "the one who loved his mother").

I have added an acute accent on what to some readers may be unfamiliar names, to indicate where the English emphasis is usually placed (e.g., Agáthocles). All dates are BC, unless indicated otherwise.

Achaéus: Governed Asia Minor (modern Turkey) for his relative the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, and in 220 claimed the throne for himself. Was besieged by Antiochus in Sardis for two years, captured and executed in 213.

Agésilaus: King of Sparta 400–359. Failed to preserve the dominance Sparta won over the Greek states with victory in the Peloponnesian War (431–404). Able general, but strategic limitations contributed to Theban revival and the humiliating defeat of Sparta at the battle of Leuctra (371). Subject of an encomium by Xenophon.

Andrískus: Appeared suddenly in 149 as a claimant to the Macedonian throne (which the Romans had abolished in 167). After initial and surprising success, his revolt was suppressed.

Antígonus III Doson ("The one who will give"): King of Macedon

229–221. Successfully promoted Macedonian influence in southern Greece. Invited by the Achaean League to help them against the Spartan king, Cleomenes III, he organized his allies into a Hellenic League and defeated Cleomenes in 222. He died suddenly the following year.

Antíochus III “the Great”: Seleucid king 223–187. Suppressed revolts at the beginning of his reign, and subsequently succeeded brilliantly in restoring and consolidating Seleucid power. His expansion into Greece led to war with Rome, in which he was defeated at the battle of Magnesia in 190 and forced to abandon western Asia Minor. Died the following year on campaign in Iran.

Antíochus IV Epíphanes (“The one with the manifest power”): Seleucid king 175–164. Prevented by Gaius Popillius Laenas from conquering Egypt in 168. Famous for his persecution of Judaism, called, in the Book of Daniel, “the abomination of desolation.”

Apélles: Courtier of Philip V of Macedon. The story of his conspiracy against Philip is one of the main story lines developed by Polybius in book 4 and the early chapters of book 5.

Arátus (271–213): Leading Greek politician and main architect of the Achaean League’s success in the second half of the third century BC. Wrote a work entitled *Memoirs* (it does not survive), regarded by Polybius as a “truthful and clear” account of his career. His son was also called Aratus, and also led the Achaean League.

Aristotle (384–322): Plato’s greatest pupil and himself one of the giants of the Western philosophical tradition, which he continues to influence today. Born in northern Greece, he moved to Athens at the age of seventeen to study at the Academy under Plato. Later tutored the young Alexander the Great in Macedon, but returned to Athens and founded the Lyceum. His interests stretched beyond the purely philosophical into, for instance, biology, mathematics, rhetoric, meteorology.

Áttalus I Soter (“Savior”): Highly successful king of Pergamum 241–197. Resisted the Galatians, Bithynians, and Seleucids and effectively used his pro-Roman stance to strengthen the position of Pergamum.

Áttalus II Philadelphus (“Brother-loving”): Second son of Attalus I and king of Pergamum 158–138. Consistently loyal to Rome, sending military assistance against Andriscus in 148 and the Achaean League in 146.

Callícrates (died 149/148): Powerful Achaean politician in the 170s and opponent of Polybius, who regarded his unwaveringly pro-Roman policies as profoundly damaging to Achaean interests. Polybius was one of the 1,000 Achaean leaders deported to Italy

on his advice.

Cato: Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149), known as “Cato the Censor,” consul 195, censor 184. Gained a reputation as a cantankerously stern upholder of old Roman values with a special hostility toward all things Greek. Made seminal contribution to the foundation of Latin prose writing, but only his work *On Agriculture* survives.

Cicero: Marcus Tullius Cicero, consul 63 and most important witness to the politics of the dying Roman Republic. Never quite powerful or politically astute enough to be one of the leading players himself; he was put on a death list by Marcus Antonius and killed in 43. His literary output of speeches, letters, oratorical treatises, and philosophical works is unparalleled in the European tradition.

Cleómenes III: King of Sparta c. 235–222. His aggressions in Greece, known as the Cleomenean War (229–222), were brought to an end by the Macedonian king, Antigonos III Doson, who defeated him at the battle of Sellasia in 222. He fled to Alexandria, where he failed to win the military backing of Ptolemy IV, was put under house arrest, but broke out and committed suicide in 219.

Demétrius I: King of Syria 162–150. From 178 held as hostage in Rome, where he met and befriended Polybius. Escaped in 162 (with Polybius’ help) to take up the throne.

Éphorus (c. 405–330): Greek historian whose thirty-book history of Greece and the East (which does not survive) had great influence on later writers. Polybius calls him the first “universal” historian.

Eúmenes II Soter (“Savior”): Succeeded his father, Attalus I, as king of Pergamum in 197. Rome’s main ally in her war against Antiochus III of Syria and main beneficiary of the peace treaty that ended it (188). Encouraged Rome to destroy Perseus of Macedon, but fell under suspicion and out of Rome’s favor. Died 158.

Gaius Popillius Laenas: Consul 172 and 158. Best known for his peremptory order to Antiochus IV to withdraw from Egypt in 168.

Hannibal (247–183/182): One of the greatest generals of antiquity and Rome’s most dangerous enemy. As commander in Spain, precipitated Second Punic War (218–202). Crossed the Pyrenees and then the Alps to invade Italy. A series of brilliant victories culminated in the battle of Cannae in 216, at which he inflicted a devastating defeat on the Roman army. Subsequently made little progress in subduing Italy and was recalled to Carthage in 203. Defeated by Scipio Africanus in 202 at the battle of Zama. Forced out of Carthage, and acted as consultant to various kings.

Committed suicide to avoid being handed over to Rome.

Hermeias: Wicked courtier of Antiochus III, balancing Apelles and Sosibius (in Polybius' account) in the Macedonian and Ptolemaic courts.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus (modern Bodrum on the Aegean coast of Turkey) (c. 484–c. 425): Author of the earliest extant work of Greek history. His account of the rise of the Persian empire and its confrontation with the Greeks is one of the great narratives of antiquity. Although it was always admired for its style and stories, its veracity was doubted by ancient critics, but has been rehabilitated (largely) in the modern era.

Hiero II: Ruler of Syracuse c. 271–216. After initially supporting Carthage at the start of the First Punic war (264–241), became loyal Roman subordinate and valuable ally in the war against Hannibal.

Livy (59 BC–AD 17): Monumental Roman historian covering the period from the foundation of the city to 9 BC in 142 books (of which 35 survive; later summaries tell us what was in the others).

Lucius Aemilius Paullus (father of Scipio Aemilianus): Consul in 182 and 168, brought the Third Macedonian War to an end by defeating Perseus at the battle of Pydna in 168. Died 160.

Lycórtas: Leading Achaean politician in the 180s, and father of Polybius. Friend and political associate of Philopoemen, he urged the Achaeans to assert their rights in relation to Rome, but was outmaneuvered by the obsequiously pro-Roman Callicrates.

Lycúrgus: Semi-legendary Spartan law giver to whom later tradition assigned all Sparta's laws and political and military institutions.

Massiníssa: Friend of the Scipios, recognised as king of Numidia (modern Tunisia/Algeria) for his services to Rome at the end of the war against Hannibal (202). Admired by Polybius, he was a shrewd local ruler whose realistic assessment of the might of Rome informed his long and successful reign. Died 148.

Perseus: Son of Philip V and last king of Macedon 179–168.

Inherited his father's interest in southern Greece, arousing the suspicions of Rome and her friends in the area. The Third Macedonian War (171–168) resulted, brought to an end by the Roman victory at the battle of Pydna. Perseus was captured and later died in Italy. Rome abolished the Macedonian monarchy.

Philip V: King of Macedon 221–179. A central figure in Polybius' work, featuring prominently in books 4 and 5. Defeated by Rome at the battle of Cynoscephalae in 197 during the Second Macedonian War (200–197). Repaired relations with Rome, but remained an object of suspicion for his interest in extending

Macedonian influence into southern Greece.

Philopoémen: Famous Greek politician and leader of the Achaean League in the late third and early second centuries BC. Occupied for much of his career by Sparta's problematic relationship to the league. Opposed those who advocated subservient policy toward Rome. Polybius carried his ashes at his funeral in 182.

Phylárchus: Third-century BC Greek historian whose now lost *Histories* covered the period 272–219. Criticized by Polybius for sensationalism and other failings.

Plato (c. 428–347): The most famous of all ancient Greek philosophers, he founded the Academy, the prototype of the university. Born into a leading Athenian family, he was converted to philosophy by Socrates. All his works are presented in dialogue form, and, whether in ethical and political thought, or in theories of knowledge, the soul, the cosmos, have proved to be of seminal influence in virtually all subsequent Western philosophy.

Prúsias II Cynégus (“The hunter”): King of Bithynia (northern Turkey) 182–149. Married the sister of Perseus, king of Macedon, and, to the senate's annoyance, remained neutral when Perseus went to war with Rome. Retained Rome's favor with a display of subservience scorned by Polybius.

Ptolemy IV Philopátor (“Father-loving”): King of Egypt 221–204. Although in 217 he was victorious, to Polybius' surprise, over the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, at the battle of Raphia (in southern Palestine), he lost control of southern Egypt to an Egyptian pretender. It took Ptolemaic forces twenty years to reestablish their authority in the area. Murdered by his leading courtiers.

Ptolemy V Epíphanes (“The one with manifest power”): King of Egypt 204–180. Succeeded to the throne as a child. Lost territory outside Egypt to joint Seleucid–Macedonian aggression; inside Egypt the secession of the south of the country was finally brought to an end in 186. Epiphanes was the king addressed by the priestly decree of 196 recorded on the famous Rosetta stone.

Ptolemy VI Philométor (“Mother-loving”): King of Egypt 180–145. Unable to repel Antiochus IV's assault on Egypt, he was saved by Roman intervention, but was plagued by family problems for the rest of his reign. Forced out of Egypt in 164, he was restored by Rome, but had to allow his brother, Ptolemy VIII Euérgetes (“Benefactor”; he was also called Physcon, “Potbelly”), to rule in Cyrene.

Pytheas of Marseilles: Fourth-century BC explorer, the first to circumnavigate Britain, he also reported on the amber regions of the North Sea and may well have reached Iceland. His work *On the Ocean* does not survive. Polybius, among others, did not

believe his account.

Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus: Consul 233, 228, 215, 214, and 209, architect of Rome's victory in the war against Hannibal. As dictator in 217 he developed his famous policy of avoiding pitched battle with Hannibal (whence he got the name *cunctator*, "the delayer"). Died 203.

Quintus Fabius Pictor: Senator and first Roman historian (he wrote in Greek), whose now lost work went back to the foundation of Rome and was used as a source by Polybius. He fought in the Second Punic War (218–202), but little is known of his life.

Quintus Marcius Philippus: Consul 186 and 169. His diplomacy in 172, thought by some senators to have been dishonest, is said to have given Rome time to prepare for war against Perseus, king of Macedon. Refused Achaean help (offered by Polybius) against Macedon in 169.

Régulus: Marcus Atilius Regulus, consul 267 and 256. Invaded Africa during the First Punic War (264–241) and defeated the Carthaginians, but his harsh peace terms were rejected. The following year (255) he was defeated, captured, and died in captivity.

Scipio Aemiliánus: Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus Africanus Numantinus (son of Lucius Aemilius Paullus), consul 147 and 134. Close friend of Polybius. Destroyed Carthage in 146 (hence the name "Africanus") and Numantia in Spain in 133 (thus "Numantinus"). Died 129.

Scipio Africánus: Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, consul 205 and 194, was the hero of Rome's victory over Hannibal in the Second Punic War (218–201), finally crushing the Carthaginian forces in Africa at the battle of Zama (202). Died 183.

Sosibius: Courtier of Ptolemy IV, whose inattention to political affairs allowed Sosibius to run the Ptolemaic government.

Theopómpus (c. 378–c. 320): Highly stylized Greek historian, whose main work—although lost, many fragments and quotations from it survive—was a wide-ranging study in fifty-eight books based on the career of Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great.

Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400): Athenian politician, soldier, and historian. His study of the Peloponnesian War (431–404) between Athens and Sparta (and their respective allies) is a work of towering brilliance and marks him as the greatest historian of antiquity.

Timaeus of Tauromenium in Sicily (c. 350–260): The most important historian of western Greek affairs. Wrote a thirty-eight-

book history of Sicily from the beginning to 289/288, and an account of Rome's wars against Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus (northwest Greece), neither of which survives. Fiercely criticised by Polybius, especially in book 12.

Xenophon (c. 430–c. 357): Soldier, philosopher, and prolific man of letters, best known for leading a Greek mercenary army out of the heart of Asia to the Black Sea—the famous march of the 10,000, which he recorded in his work the *Anabasis*. One of the major figures of Greek literature, particularly in the fields of history, philosophy, and technical works.

Xerxes I: King of Persia 486–465. Inherited plans to conquer Greece from his father, Darius, whose punitive expedition against Athens had been defeated at the battle of Marathon in 490. The Persian invasion force was held up at Thermopylae and then defeated by sea at Salamis (480) and on land at Plataea (479).

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